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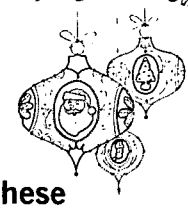

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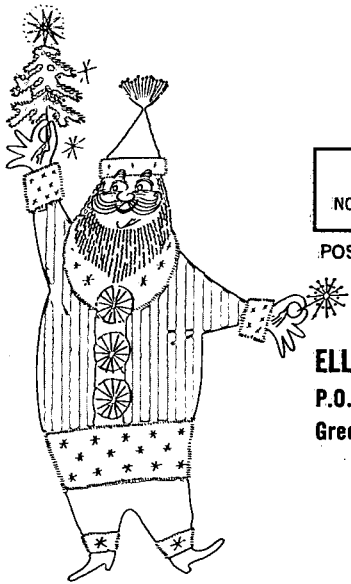

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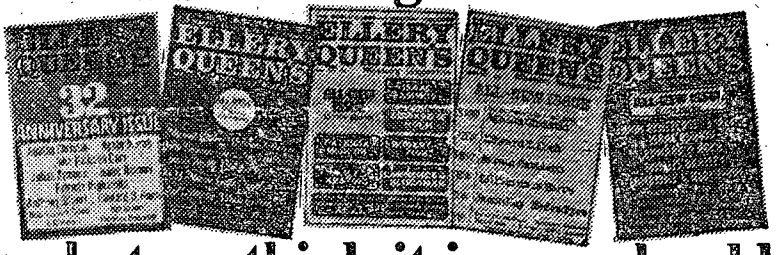

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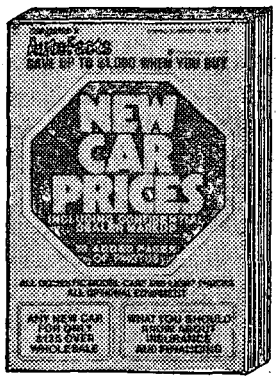

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(Would an American author have even thought of making a cleaning woman, a down-to-earth Everywoman, a detective? We wonder. Ah, democracy, and its many faces, seen and unseen.)

THE FIVE SENSES OF MRS. CRAGGS

by H. R. F. KEATING

I: *Seeing*

Of all the various cleaning jobs that Mrs. Craggs had had in the course of a long work life, the one at the place they called Murray's House was the one she liked best. Yet she was the person most responsible, when you came down to it, for bringing that job to an end.

Murray's House was a funny old place. It had belonged back in the Eighteenth Century to old Peter Murray, the inventor and discoverer and gatherer of curiosities, and eventually it had been left to the Borough, who kept it as nearly the way it had been as they could and charged the public to see it. Not that many of the public were willing to pay, but there it was.

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Certainly Mrs. Craggs got to like the old place very much. It used to please her to think, when she toiled up the stairs, that she was seeing exactly the same twirls and curls in the banisters that old Peter Murray had seen all those years before. And though she didn't particularly understand many of the curious wooden machines and other things the house was filled with, she liked them all the same. Old Peter Murray had worked on them and put his skill and care into them, and you could tell.

So it was all the more awful when Mrs. Craggs arrived for work one morning, with her friend Mrs. Milhorne, and found that the night porter, old Mr. Berbottle, had been murdered, an event which was to result before long in the final closing of the old house. Thanks to Mrs. Craggs.

Of course everybody said at once that there could be no doubt who had killed Mr. Berbottle: the skinheads—the neighborhood gang of young hooligans. They were always breaking into places and this time poor crotchety, pernickety old Mr. Berbottle must have disturbed them and for that had his head laid open with a piece of lead piping. And all the previous day's receipts, such as they were, had disappeared.

The worst of it was, though, that this had been the first time the money had been left on the premises overnight. Generally, after the manager, Mr. Fingles, had checked it, the money was taken and put in the night safe of the bank by Mr. Tanker, the day porter, a rippling-muscled former bosun of a sail-training ship, who stood for no nonsense from skinheads or anyone else. But Mr. Tanker had been taken ill at lunchtime, and the manager had said there would be no harm in leaving the money in the house for just one night. He and Mr. Berbottle between them were quite capable of looking after it. Only, when it had come to it, Mr. Fingles, who was notorious for liking his half bottle of wine with his dinner, had been so soundly asleep in his comfortable little private flat at the top of the house that he had not heard a thing.

So there the police were all over the place and there was little Mr. Fingles, who had discovered the body when he had come down to collect the mail, in more of a state of agitation than usual, rushing up and down on his little clickety heels and getting in everybody's way. "Like a regular old clockwork doll," Mrs. Craggs had murmured to Mrs. Milhorne, her fellow worker, as they waited

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for the fingerprint men and the police photographer to finish.

They had a long wait of it too, with nothing more exciting to see for most of the time than the Detective-Superintendent in charge prowling about and looking important, though, as Mrs. Milhorne said, "It isn't as if it's exactly what you'd call a mystery killing, is it?" But at last the Superintendent himself came up to the two of them.

"Very well, ladies," he said, "I shall be here for some time to come, I expect, but there's nothing to stop you two going ahead with your work now. My lads have got everything they want."

And then he paused and became a bit uneasy.

"There is one thing, though," he added. "The porter's room there, where it happened."

"Yes?" said Mrs. Craggs, glancing along to the little room with the ticket window.

"Well," said the Superintendent, still looking uncomfortable, "the fact of the matter is there's—well, there's what you might call traces on the floor in there, and I don't know whether you'd object to—er—dealing with them."

"I couldn't," declared Mrs. Milhorne, with great promptness. "I'm afraid to say I'd come all over queer. I'd be bound to. I've got nerves, you see."

"You don't have to do it," Mrs. Craggs broke in. "The porter's room has linoleum on the floor, and lino polishing's my department, always has been."

She turned to the Superintendent and jerked her head at Mrs. Milhorne.

"She's dusting," she said.

And so off to her dusting went Mrs. Milhorne, though not without putting a hand to her skinny chest and declaring she could "feels the heartbeats something terrible," and Mrs. Craggs matter-of-factly fetched herself a pail of hot water and a scrubbing brush and tackled the porter's room, thinking all the while how old Mr. Berbottle had been so nosey and pernickety and interfering, and how now none of it was doing him any good.

It was only later, when she was on her knees polishing the thin strip of brown linoleum that edged the entrance hall, that she came across something that made her stop suddenly and rise to her feet with a decidedly grim expression on her battered old nutbrown face.

"Mrs. Milhorne, dear," she called to her friend, who was halfway up the stairs, busy doing some fancywork with her duster on the twirls and twiddles of the old banisters.

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"Yes, dear?"

"I think I'm just going to have a word with that Superintendent," Mrs. Craggs said. "I want to tell him about this footprint on the lino."

"Footprint on the lino?"

Mrs. Milhorne abandoned her dusting and came down to look. She found her friend standing with sturdy legs wide apart over a footprint, or to be accurate, half a footprint, just on the edge of the lino where it met the broad, but very threadbare, central carpet.

"It's a bare foot," Mrs. Milhorne pronounced after a long inspection. "Looking as if it was on its way to go out by the front door."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Craggs.

"And you're going to the Superintendent about it? Well, I know you don't like to have your polish trod on when you've just got it looking all nice, but to go to Scotland Yard about that—well, it beats all."

And Mrs. Milhorne indulged in her favorite trilling laugh.

"He's not Scotland Yard, he's local," said Mrs. Craggs, and off she stumped.

Mrs. Milhorne decided to have a rest from her dusting and stay where she was by the footprint. To her immense surprise, scarcely ten minutes later Mrs. Craggs came back with the Superintendent. And the great man himself actually squatted down and closely examined the half footprint. Then he pushed himself to his feet and set off up the stairs, looking extremely thoughtful.

At the turn, however, he encountered the manager, coming click-clacking excitedly down. And it was then that Mrs. Milhorne got her biggest surprise of all.

"Mr. Fingles," the Superintendent said to the manager in a voice doom-laden with formality. "I should like you to accompany me to the station, where I have a number of questions I wish to put to you."

It wasn't until the news was in the paper that Mr. Fingles had been charged with the murder that Mrs. Craggs agreed to answer a single one of the many questions Mrs. Milhorne had plagued her with. Then she did explain.

"Clear as the nose on me face really, dear, when you come to think," she said. "Why would a naked footprint be right there on the lino at the edge of the hall?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Mrs. Milhorne replied. "Unless someone just happened to be creeping along there."

"Of course they were creeping, dear. And who would have

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to creep so as to get right up close to old Mr. Berbottle if it wasn't someone he knew and would wonder what they were doing carrying a piece of lead piping? Especially if it was someone who can't walk about anywhere without making a noise like a little old tip-tapping clockwork doll?"

Mrs. Milhorne pondered over this at length.

"I suppose you're right, dear," she said at last. "But I would've thought a bare footprint like that meant our Mr. Tanker, not Mr. Fingles. Mr. Tanker was always saying how he wore no shoes when he went climbing up all those masts on that ship of his."

"And why would Mr. Tanker want to murder Mr. Berbottle?" Mrs. Craggs demanded.

"I'm sure I don't know, dear. But, come to that, why *did* Mr. Fingles want to murder him?"

"Because of the money, of course," Mrs. Craggs answered. "And Mr. Fingles with his bottles of wine to buy and his nice comfortable flat up there to keep going."

"The money?" Mrs. Milhorne asked.

"Yes. Wasn't this the first time the money had been left here overnight? And wasn't Mr. Berbottle, rest him, just the sort of interfering old fool who would go and check the money against the tickets issued, even though he knew that was Mr. Fingles' job?"

It took Mrs. Milhorne a little time to sort it all out, but she got there in the end.

"You mean Mr. Fingles had been pinching a bit of the takings all along, to help him out, like?" she said. "Now, why couldn't I have seen that?"

Mrs. Craggs gave her a slow smile.

"Because you ain't very keen to get down on your hands and knees, dear," she said, "and see what's in front of your face."

II: *Smelling*

When Mrs. Craggs had the washing-up job at a select residential hotel, she used to allow herself a little treat in the summertime. Between finishing the lunch dishes and beginning on the tea things she took a cup for herself and sat with it in the storeroom. It was not exactly comfortable. Mrs. Craggs had to perch herself on a packing case and there was precious little light.

But it had one distinct advantage as far as Mrs. Craggs was concerned: a row of frosted-glass louver windows high up in one wall that formed

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the back of the hotel's delightful rose garden. So, in consequence, Mrs. Craggs, sitting on that packing case in the gloom of the storeroom amid a strong smell of soap, was often able to hear the most fascinating conversations.

She was quite unashamed of this. As she said to her friend and coworker, Mrs. Milhorne, to whom she occasionally retailed certain, but not all, of the things she heard, "If they don't know it, then it don't do them no harm. And I think it's interesting." And so, day by day, she contrived to get a notion of almost all the hotel's regular guests, and even visitors who came only for tea often could be added to her bag.

So when, one day, sitting on her accustomed uncomfortable seat, she heard old Mr. Danchflower refer to the elderly visitor with whom he was taking tea as "Lady Etherege," Mrs. Craggs pricked up her ears. Mrs. Milhorne enjoyed feeling she was getting a worm's-eye view of the aristocracy and it did no harm to have a tidbit to feed to Mrs. Milhorne from time to time.

Not that, it soon developed, Lady Etherege was any great shakes when you came down to it. She was blue-blooded all right—you could tell that just by listening to her delicate, tired old voice—but she was far from being rich. Of course, she didn't come right out with that. Not at what was probably the first time she met old Mr. Danchflower who, though he might not be particularly aristocratic, was certainly well off, as you had to be to stay in one of the hotel's best rooms summer and winter alike.

Yet bit by bit, as Mrs. Craggs savored her good, big, strong cup of tea and listened to the two elderly voices floating in through the louver above her, it became quite plain that old Lady Etherege lived like a church mouse.

Mrs. Craggs began to feel really sorry for her. It was all right being poor when you were used to it, but to end your days like that when you'd begun grand as grand, that was hard. Not that Lady Etherege didn't have compensations, it seemed. She even had, so her conversation revealed little by little, an admirer.

Admittedly he was an admirer at a distance. Over in France. And the form his admiration took was no more than sending her for each birthday a bottle of perfume. But what perfume! Mrs. Craggs gathered that the latest bottle had actually been taken, with great reverence, out of Lady Etherege's handbag and that now its stopper was being

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gently removed and Mr. Danchflower was being permitted a discreet inhalation.

"Oh, excellent," Mrs. Craggs heard him say. "Really, madam, a most delicate scent. What shall I say it reminds me of? Not these roses even. It's far more subtle than that."

"Yes, yes," came Lady Etherege's voice. "It comes from a past age. An age I once knew, let me admit it."

Mrs. Craggs could have sworn she even heard the sigh through the narrow slits of the frosted-glass louver.

"Ah," Lady Etherege added, "there was a time, my dear sir, when I myself had no hesitation in entering a boutique in the Rue St. Honoré and buying perfume at twenty-five pounds a tiny bottle."

"Twenty-five pounds," said old Mr. Danchflower. "I can well believe this cost that much, madam. A most remarkably fine and delicate scent."

"Oh, well," Lady Etherege answered, her simper, too, almost floating through the narrow window, "since we are friends I can tell you that this tiny bottle actually cost even more than that. My dear, dear old admirer accidentally left the bill in the package last year and before I crumpled it up I could not help noticing that the sum mentioned was the equivalent—you'll hardly believe this, but everything is so very, *very* expensive nowadays—was the equivalent of no less than forty pounds."

"Indeed, indeed, madam. But I do believe it I assure—"

And then through the open louver came what could only be described as a feminine shriek of utter horror, followed an instant later by the small but unmistakable sound of breaking glass.

"Madam, how could I? I—I don't know what I did. I could have sworn the bottle was safe on the arm of the bench, but—"

Old Mr. Danchflower's voice faded into utterly overwhelmed silence. But, rooted on her packing case, Mrs. Craggs could hear all too clearly Lady Etherege's choked sobs, though it was plain she was doing all in her power to restrain them.

And then, seconds later, she heard her own name being loudly called out in the kitchen.

"Mrs. Craggs, Mrs. Craggs! Where is the woman?"

It was Mr. Browne, the under-manager, in even more of a tizzy than usual. Mrs. Craggs slipped down off the packing case, put her teacup where it wouldn't be noticed, and emerged.

"Ah, there you are. There you are. Quick, quick, Mrs. Craggs, out into the rose garden

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with a bucket and cloth. As fast as you can, as fast as you can. There has been the most terrible disaster."

Mrs. Craggs, without saying she well knew what the disaster was; rapidly filled a bucket with water, seized a floor cloth, and went scuttling round after Mr. Browne.

"It's perfume," Mr. Brown explained, quite unnecessarily since the whole of the garden was now smelling to high heaven of a scent that certainly wasn't that of roses. "A most unfortunate accident. But we must sweep it all away on the instant. On the instant. It must be as if it had never been."

So Mrs. Craggs scarcely looked at the two sad spectators of the tragic scene, Mr. Danchflower standing erect and still deeply blushing and little Lady Etherege beside him, dabbing the daintiest of handkerchiefs to her old tired eyes. Instead Mrs. Craggs swooshed most of the contents of her bucket over the thick oily stain on a large flagstone and then began to mop up as fast as she was able till the pail itself smelled like an oversize bouquet of every flower you could think of.

And, as she worked, Mrs. Craggs heard the two old people talk.

"Madam, may I say again that I cannot think how I could have been so abominably careless. I didn't see the bottle, but I suppose my sleeve must have just caught it."

"It's perfectly all right."

"No. No, madam, it is not all right. You have lost something extremely valuable to you, not only financially but sentimentally. It is not all right, madam."

"It—it was of some sentimental value, yes."

"Madam, that I can never repair. But at least—please be so good as to let me write you a check for forty pounds."

"Oh, no. No, really. Really I could not."

But old Mr. Danchflower had sat down on the bench, taken his check book from his pocket, and was already writing. Lady Etherege sat down beside him.

"No, really, sir," she said. "From an acquaintance of such short standing I could not possibly—"

"Nonsense, madam, nonsense. There, take it!"

"Well. Well, if you insist . . . And there I do believe I see the stopper. I think I will just keep it. You know, a—a souvenir."

Her frail old hand reached down to somewhere near where Mrs. Cragg's floor cloth was at work and the fingers closed round the ornate glass. And

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then Mrs. Craggs's fingers closed round Lady Etherege's.

"Oh, no, you don't," Mrs. Craggs said loudly.

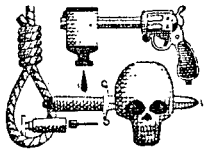
"Don't? Don't? I do not understand."

Beneath Mrs. Craggs's grasp the thin fingers wriggled hard.

"Oh, yes, you do," said Mrs. Craggs. "You understand quite well that this stopper's got a false compartment in its top. A compartment filled with the delicate scent Mr. Danchflower liked so much, and not with this nasty cheap muck ponging to high heaven."

And then old Lady Etherege dropped the stopper, slid her hand from Mrs. Craggs's grasp, rose in an instant, seized the half-full bucket, emptied its contents all over Mrs. Craggs, and was out of the garden, into the street, and had hopped onto a passing bus before anybody else had time to realize what Lady Etherege had done.

And, as Mrs. Craggs said, "For days and days afterwards you could tell I was coming round the corner yards before I got there. What a niff!"



III: *Touching*

One of the places where Mrs. Craggs once worked as a charwoman was the Borough Museum, and she was there at the time that the celebrated Golden Venus was on a week's loan exhibition. Indeed, she had the honor, obtained not without difficulty, of being allowed to dust this small but extremely ancient and valuable object.

At first, of course, no one had seen the necessity for carrying out such an everyday task. But when the Venus had been on its special display stand surrounded by its own rope barrier for some 48 hours, it became evident that even something as precious as this needed the attentions of the duster. Mr. Slythe, the museum's assistant curator, had not been in favor of delegating this task to Mrs. Craggs.

"But the Venus, but a charlady," he had twittered. "What if she did some damage? My mother's dailies are always breaking things. Always."

Mrs. Craggs stood there impassively, waiting to know whether or not she was going to be allowed to get on with it. And it was Mr. Tovey, the curator himself, who gave the final go-ahead.

"Nonsense, man," he said to Mr. Slythe. "The statue's solid

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metal, unharmed for over two thousand years, and you know how firmly it's fixed to the plinth. We both of us saw to that."

"Ah, well, yes, I suppose so, I suppose so," Mr. Slythe agreed. And then he approached the statue for about the fiftieth time since it had been installed and started once more what Mrs. Craggs called "his cooing act."

"Ah," he said, "the patina, the patina, the inimitable patina of age."

If he'd said that once he'd said it twenty times, Mrs. Craggs thought irritably.

And then Mr. Tovey, not to be outdone, approached the sacred work of art in his turn. And repeated what he had said some twenty times since the piece had been installed.

"The hand of genius, the unmistakable hand of genius. Marvelous, magnificent, absolutely wonderful."

"Shall I do it now, sir?" asked Mrs. Craggs.

"Oh, very well, carry on then. Carry on."

And both Mr. Tovey and Mr. Slythe turned away so as not to see Mrs. Craggs's common yellow duster touch the product of "the unmistakable hand of genius" or "the patina of age." And then they both slewed round again to make sure that, in spite of everything, Mrs. Craggs was not wreaking havoc on the great work.

Indeed, the week of its exhibition was one of considerable strain for both the curator and his assistant. There was not only the public, which would keep coming and looking, attracted in numbers such as the museum had never seen before by stories in the papers about the immense value of the little golden statue, but there was the question of security at night. Of course, a firm of guards had been hired and a pair of them made hourly patrols past the Golden Venus on its plinth while others were on duty at both the front and back doors. But Mr. Tovey had decided this was not enough and had arranged with Mr. Slythe that they should each spend half of every night of the exhibition week on the premises.

Both of them took every chance to point out to anybody who would listen, even to Mrs. Craggs if no one better offered, what sacrifices of time they were making, and of saying simultaneously in their different ways that, of course, it was really no sacrifice at all to be able to spend hours in private contemplation either of "the unmistakable hand of genius, coming down to us through the centuries" or of "the patina,

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the wonderful patina of age, so fine yet so very, very enduring."

So it could hardly be expected that either of them would react with calm when, on the last morning of the Venus' stay in the museum, Mrs. Craggs told them one after the other that the object over which she had just used her common yellow duster was not the genuine Golden Venus but a substitute.

She lay in wait first for Mr. Tovey.

"I'm very sorry to have to tell you, sir," she said when he re-entered the museum, "that is not the same statue as what I dusted yesterday."

"What—what do you mean, woman? Not the same statue?"

"I can tell, sir. I can tell by the touch. I've dusted that five times in all since it's been here and I know the feel of it as well as I know the back of me own hand."

"We'll have a look at this," Mr. Tovey declared.

And he took the steps two at a time up to the landing where the Golden Venus stood. He drew a long breath and glared hard at the statue, then rounded on Mrs. Craggs.

"Piffle, my good woman," he said. "Sheer and utter piffle! Why, you've only to look to see the hand of genius there, the unmistakable hand of genius."

"And you've only got to lay a duster on it to know it's not the same as what it was yesterday," Mrs. Craggs declared, with equal firmness.

Mr. Tovey drew himself up. But he did not pour forth the torrent of words Mrs. Craggs had braced herself for. Instead he suddenly thrust his big round face close to hers and spoke in a low whisper.

"Now, listen to me, my good woman, you are wrong. You cannot be anything else. I have a lifetime of knowledge behind me when I tell you that statue *is* the Golden Venus. But I know what the press is and what reporters are capable of. So, understand this, you are not to breathe one word of even the possibility of a theft. Not one word."

Mrs. Craggs looked doubtful. But Mr. Tovey was a persuasive employer and at last she mumbled agreement. Yet, thinking the matter over, she came to the conclusion that his prohibition ought not to include his fellow art expert, Mr. Slythe. So she waited her chance and at last managed to corner him at a spot not far from the Golden Venus, during a slack period in the museum's unaccustomedly busy life.

"Can I have a word?" she asked.

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"Yes, yes. What is it? What is it now? Always something. Always some pettifogging detail preventing one from concentrating on one's true work."

"Well, if you say that someone putting a dummy in place of that Golden Venus is a detail," Mrs. Craggs answered, "then that's your privilege. But I think it ought to be gone into."

Mr. Slythe was even more upset than Mr. Tovey. He scooted over the stone floor toward the statue as if he had been unexpectedly put on roller skates and he peered at it with such fearful intensity that he might almost have melted it. And then he returned, white-faced, to Mrs. Craggs. But not with dismay. With anger.

"You wretched, wretched person," he said. "How dare you? How dare you say a thing like that to me? It's enough to give me a nervous breakdown. Yes, a nervous breakdown."

"Then you don't think it has been changed?" Mrs. Craggs said.

"I do not. Why, anyone with a grain of sensibility could see that *piece* has the patina of age on every inch of it. The unmistakable patina of age. And you tell me that it is a substitute!"

And Mr. Slythe wheeled round and marched away to the sanctuary of his private office.

Mrs. Craggs ought to have been convinced. But, if she was, then why was it that she came to the museum the evening after the immensely successful Golden Venus exhibition had been triumphantly concluded and put in a good many hours of overtime, unpaid? She got out her dustcloths and worked away, rubbing and polishing stairs and corridors, showcases and display rooms. The museum had never gleamed so in all its days.

And at last her prowling duster encountered what she had hoped it would. In next to no time she was out on the steps of the building looking up and down the street, and before long she saw what she was looking for—the local police constable passing on his beat. She beckoned to him.

"I want to report a theft," she said.

The constable hurried in and Mrs. Craggs led him to the place where, dusting and polishing, she had come across a loose tile in the wall decoration of one of the rooms.

"Look," she said.

And she prised out the tile and the one next to it, to reveal a long cavity in which, reposing on a layer of cottonwool, was nothing less than the real Golden Venus.

"It was changed over during

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one of the gaps between the security patrols," Mrs. Craggs declared.

The constable, who had been aware of the precautions taken over so valuable a piece of property on his beat, saw at once what the situation was.

"It must have been one of them two," he said. "The what-sit—curator, Mr. Tovey, or his Number Two, Mr. Slythe. One of them must have hidden it here till he could slip it out. But—but which? They were each on guard alone half the night. Which could it be?"

"That's simple enough," Mrs. Craggs replied. "They both of them told me I was an old fool for saying it had been changed over. But only one of them made a fuss about not telling anyone else. It's the 'unmistakable hand of genius' you've got to go for, not 'the patina of age.'"

IV: *Hearing*

When Mrs. Craggs first went to work for old Mrs. Proost she rather liked listening to the old lady's music boxes. They were her most cherished possession, left to her by her husband who had died years before and who had devoted his life to the collection. But, as time passed and Mrs. Proost insisted on playing one box or another the whole of the time Mrs. Craggs was cleaning in the house, the charwoman began, as she said to her friend Mrs. Milhorne, "To really hate the blessed things."

"I like a good tune," she said, "same as anyone else. But to hear that tinkle, tinkle, tinkle all day and every, why, it's more than human ears can stand." Mrs. Milhorne wondered how the old lady herself could put up with it. "I'll tell you," said Mrs. Craggs. "It's because she doesn't hear a single note."

Why ever not, Mrs. Milhorne wanted to know. It wasn't as if the old lady was deaf, because she'd seen her herself, out doing a bit of shopping and talking with the best, "and never a sign of them little things behind your ear."

Mrs. Craggs had smiled at that. "Oh," she said, "she wouldn't let on. Go to any lengths she would to pretend she's heard every word. Nod and smile like an old teetotum. But I know. I can go into that sitting room of hers and so long as I take good care to stand where she can't see me lips, I can say 'Wotcher, me old mate, how's all the little tinkle boxes then?' and she don't take one blind bit of notice."

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But Mrs. Craggs put up with the tinkle-tinkling because Mrs. Proost was a nice old thing, even if she was too proud to admit how little she could hear. And all went well. Till the day the old lady asked Mrs. Craggs if, as a special favor, she could come back the next afternoon and serve tea.

"It's my nephew," she said. "My husband's brother's boy. Tony. Such a dear little fellow he used to be, though I'm afraid his parents, poor dear souls, spoiled him dreadfully."

Mrs. Craggs replied that certainly she would come the next day at three and she asked how it was that the young man had never visited his aunt in all the years Mrs. Craggs had been working for her.

"Oh, but you see," said Mrs. Proost, "he's been dreadfully busy. Yes, in the North. He's been away in the North for—oh, for quite eight years now. A most important post."

"What's that then?" asked Mrs. Craggs, opening her lips wide.

"Oh, dear. Well, you will think me silly, but I can't quite recall. It was something to do with aeroplanes, I think. Or was it aerodromes? But it *was* important. I can tell you that."

Mrs. Craggs had been in the kitchen, slicing bread nice and thin for some twenty minutes when the visitor arrived. She answered his ring at the door and showed him into the sitting room. But she was not impressed. Nephew Tony was a good deal older than Mrs. Proost had led her to expect, and he had too travel-worn a look for someone with an important job to do with airplanes, or even airfields. As he walked ahead of her across the hall, she thought she could hear one of the soles of his shoes flapping slightly.

So, instead of retiring discreetly until four o'clock, when it had been agreed she should bring in tea, Mrs. Craggs contrived to stand by the door of the room, as if she was, despite her flowered apron and best hat worn in honor of the event, a sort of footman.

Nephew Tony was very breezy and bold and Mrs. Craggs could see old Mrs. Proost looking at his face carefully as he sat opposite her and so succeeding in answering his hearty remarks about thinking he "wouldn't bother with a taxi from the station, just gave myself a tuppenny bus ride, you know." More like it he walked, thought Mrs. Craggs, even though it was three miles.

But just then Mrs. Proost realized that the charwoman was still hovering over the proceedings.

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"Mrs. Craggs," she said, "you may serve tea."

"Bit early, ain't it?" Mrs. Craggs asked, after advancing to where her lips could be read.

"Never mind," Mrs. Proost replied, with a dignity recalling the days when she'd had a real parlormaid in black dress and lace cap. "Master Tony and I will take tea now."

"Very good," said Mrs. Craggs. And so impressed was she with the high tone that her employer had achieved, she added, though rather belatedly, "Madam."

But nevertheless out in the kitchen she got the rest of the tea things onto the tray in record time and made the tea itself—in the silver teapot, appearing especially for the occasion—without actually waiting for the pot to warm. And when she entered the sitting room again, she thought she had arrived only just in time.

Nephew Tony was talking about Mrs. Proost's music boxes. And what he was saying sent columns of red anger marching through Mrs. Craggs's head.

"You see, Aunt," he was arguing, "these boxes may be quite valuable and since the truth of it is that, though you play them often enough, you can't really—"

With a fierce jerk of the tea tray between her outstretched arms Mrs. Craggs sent a stream of hot liquid from the spout of the silver pot plummeting straight down onto Nephew Tony's lap.

"Oh, lor, sir, lor," Mrs. Craggs said in instant apology. "What must have come over me? Oh, sir. Sir, you are a mess. Come out to the kitchen right away and I'll sponge you down. We gotter save that nice suit."

And though the suit in fact was of a cut and color that indicated years of service that had begun a long time ago, Nephew Tony did hurry out to the kitchen.

There Mrs. Craggs did nothing at all about sponging the broad spatter of tea. Instead she faced the not so young man with her arms akimbo.

"Now you just listen to me," she said. "I know what you were just going to tell her. And you're not to do it."

"What—what do you mean?" Nephew Tony asked.

"I mean you were going to tell her she's so deaf she can't hear them musical boxes. And I daresay you were going to offer to sell 'em for her. And with a big difference between the price you get and the money you'll give her."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Nephew Tony

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said. "If I was offering my aunt some good business advice, it's hardly any affair of yours. The money she gets for those boxes would probably be enough to keep her in comfort for the rest of her days."

"She's happy enough as she is, and don't you think nothing else," Mrs. Craggs answered. "She may not hear a single tinkle those blessed boxes make, but she thinks we all believe she does and that's what keeps her going. So don't you try putting your oar in."

Nephew Tony, dabbing for himself at his trousers with a snatched dishcloth, darted the charwoman a glance of fury.

"I'll thank you to keep your interfering nose out of our family business," he said. "I'm going straight back in there and tell my aunt it's plain common sense to sell those boxes, and that I know where I can get a fair price for them."

Mrs. Craggs folded her hands and stood with them in front of her, leaving the way to the kitchen door clear. But there was a look in her eyes that stopped Nephew Tony dead in his tracks.

"What are you looking like that for?" he demanded.

"Because," said Mrs. Craggs, "if you go in there I shall come after you and tell your dear aunt that her nephew's just finished a good spell in quod."

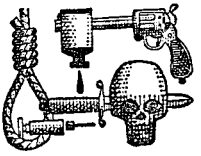
"Prison? How did you know—what do you mean 'prison'?"

"I mean just what I say. That someone who's been out of the way so long he thinks you can still get anywhere on a bus for tuppence hasn't been up in no North of England. He's been inside. I got ears in me head and unless you want me to tell her what I heard, out you go."

"Well," Mrs. Craggs said to Mrs. Proost a few minutes later, taking care to stand where the old lady could see her lips. "Well, I'm sure I don't know where he's gone. Upped and off he did, just like that. 'Spect he remembered an aeroplane he'd got to build or something."

"Yes, yes. I expect that was it," the old lady said. "Young men like him have so much on their minds, you know."

"Yes, dear—yes, madam," said Mrs. Craggs. "That's true enough. And now shall I turn one of your musical boxes on for you? I expect you'd like to hear a nice cheerful tune."



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V: *Tasting*

One of the things Mrs. Craggs had to do when she was Mrs. Fitzblaney's daily help was to stay late every Thursday evening and take up supper to Mrs. Fitzblaney's husband, the old Colonel, who was bedridden. "Thirty years between them two if there's a day," Mrs. Craggs used to say to her friend, Mrs. Milhorne. But she got well paid for this extra work, time and a half always. She had been quite firm about that the moment she was first asked, since she well knew there was money and to spare in that household. The Colonel always had the best and liked the best, there was no doubt about that. Though there was doubt about the Colonel himself. The doctor had said years before that he might go any day, and every time that Mrs. Craggs came to the house she half expected to hear the worst.

But every Thursday evening Mrs. Fitzblaney went off to her art class. "And holding hands with the art master, if all I hear's true," said Mrs. Craggs. "Still, that's no business of mine. A little of what you fancy don't do you no harm, that's my motto."

And every week Mrs. Fitzblaney left behind her two ounces of Patna rice to be boiled for ten minutes by the clock and no more and a saucepan of ready-prepared curry to be heated up.

"Fair fussy he is about his curry, the old boy," Mrs. Craggs would say. It had to be cooked in the afternoon by Mrs. Fitzblaney in exactly the way the Colonel liked it, and all Mrs. Craggs had to do was to see that she knocked on the bedroom door, with the tray in her hands, at eight o'clock to the second.

She had been late once, but only once. At half a minute past eight the Colonel's voice, despite his illness, had come roaring down the stairs. "Bearer! Bearer! Where's that blasted bearer? Fellow's late on parade. I won't have it. D'ye hear, damn and blast you? I will not have it." Very much on her dignity Mrs. Craggs had been when she went in with the tray that night.

But being on the dot was not all. That curry had to be hot as well. Not spicy hot. The Colonel liked it that way, but there the doctor had put his foot down. But as near boiling-hot as dammit that curry had to be. There had been trouble about that once too.

"Bearer, what the hell's this? Bloody *ice* pudding? Eh, man? Eh?"

"I do my best," Mrs. Craggs

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had replied. "And what's more, if I may make so bold as to mention, I am not a man, nor yet a bearer neither, whatever that may be."

But all the same ever afterward she took the precaution of dipping a finger into the saucepan and having a taste, when she thought the curry was ready, to make sure it had reached a really hot heat. The stuff was nasty enough, she thought, but she was not going to be called names at her age.

And then one Thursday came and, as Mrs. Craggs said later to Mrs. Milhorne, "I will not forget, not so long as I has breath in my body to remember by."

At the start it did not seem to be different from any other Thursday evening. Mrs. Craggs, who came to the house to do the cleaning in the afternoon, got through her work as usual. It was the sitting room on Thursdays, and the hall. And at just the usual time Mrs. Fitzblaney came down the stairs dressed as usual in her painting things—"Pair of jeans that should've been in the dustbin years ago," said Mrs. Craggs. "And too tight for her by a long chalk where I won't mention"—and as usual Mrs. Fitzblaney fussed over telling Mrs. Craggs what she knew perfectly well already.

"You won't forget to be on the dot of eight with his supper, will you, Mrs. Er—?" "—Never did have the common decency to get me name right, but that was Mrs. Fitzblaney all over," said Mrs. Craggs—and no sooner had Mrs. Craggs assured her that she had no need to worry about that than it was "Oh, and Mrs. Er—, I forgot to say. You will make quite, quite sure the curry's hot, won't you? The Colonel gets so cross if it isn't just to his liking, you know, and it's terribly bad for him to—to— Well, you know, lose his temper."

"There won't be no cause for complaint from me," said Mrs. Craggs.

And there was not. At 7:30 to the second—she had the radio on "dead quiet" to make sure—onto the stove went the water for the rice and on too went the curry over a nice low heat. And at 7:45 precisely Mrs. Craggs had the rice dished and waiting and was making doubly sure the curry was really hot. She put her finger in, winced at the heat, but nevertheless lifted a yellowy-brown gob to her lips and bravely tasted it.

"Hot as hot," she said to herself. "Old Blood-and-Guts'll have no complaints tonight." Then she poured the curry with care onto the center of the hollowed-out mound of rice,

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put the plate on the tray, and carried it upstairs. The Colonel never ate a dessert. "Blasted sweet stuff. Nobody wants to put that in their mouth," he used to say.

Mrs. Craggs knocked at the door of the bedroom just as she heard the church clock strike eight, and "Come in, come in," the Colonel shouted. Mrs. Craggs entered, carried the food over to the bed tray which was already on parade over the Colonel's knees, and set it down.

"Hm," grunted the Colonel. And then he had the grace to add, "Hah. Thank you." Mrs. Craggs knew her services were not required any longer and down she went to the kitchen.

She ought really at this point to have put on her hat and coat and left. The Colonel always pushed aside his tray when he had finished and Mrs. Fitzblaney brought it downstairs when she got back from the art class. That was the regular routine. The Colonel objected to "blasted women always coming in and out of the room like a set of damn railway trains."

But tonight something stopped Mrs. Craggs as she went to take her hat off the peg on the back of the kitchen door. It was not anything particular, just a feeling—a feeling that something was not quite as it ought to be.

For perhaps a full half minute she stood there, nose up against her coat as it hung on the peg, the hat held high in her hand. And then she got it.

"Hot," she said. "It was too hot. Spicy hot as can be." And then she dropped her hat on the floor just where she stood, wheeled round and was out of the kitchen and thumping off up the stairs in as little time as it takes to tell. She got to the top of the stairs. She made for the Colonel's door. She thrust it open without so much as a knock or a word of apology and said, "Stop!"

"Stop? Stop? What the hell d'you mean by 'stop'?"

Afterward Mrs. Craggs said to Mrs. Milhorne that she had never seen a man look so astonished. "You'd have thought it was the Angel Gabriel come in," she said. "You would have, honest."

But at the time Mrs. Craggs failed to answer the Colonel's question. Instead she fired one of her own. "That curry," she said, "have you tasted any of it?"

"Of course I've tasted my bloody curry, woman," the Colonel thundered back. "What's the infernal stuff for if it isn't to be tasted?"

"Then don't you eat one bit

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more," said Mrs. Craggs.

"What blasted nonsense is this? The first decent hot curry I've had in the last five years and you have the abominable impertinence to come in here and tell me to stop eating it. I'll do no such thing."

And the Colonel plunged his fork deep into the browny-yellow concoction and lifted a gigantic quantity, all dripping, toward his mouth.

It was then that Mrs. Craggs did an unforgivable thing. She launched herself across the room toward the bed and knocked the Colonel's full fork flying.

"What the—"

Words failed the Colonel.

"Oh, sir," said Mrs. Craggs, "I'm sorry. I really am. I don't know how I even dared to do it, sir."

"And nor do I, you infernal harridan. You're dismissed, d'you hear? Get out, do y'hear me, get out!"

But it was at that moment that the Colonel began to be seriously ill. Mrs. Craggs rolled up her sleeves and set to, and the doctor said afterward that it was solely owing to the sensible way she went about it that the Colonel came out of it as well as he did. But, as she said to Mrs. Milhorne, "I wasn't exactly as calm as a tuppenny cucumber at the time."

In fact, she had gabbled and babbled and said a lot of things that hardly made sense, all of which had had the effect of calming down the old Colonel and probably saving him to live out the rest of his life as the happy resident of a nursing home for ex-officers with proper batmen in attendance.

"It was it being so hot, sir," Mrs. Craggs had babbled that evening. "I mean I know it has to be hot. But not hot like that. And I know Mrs. Fitzblaney knows it mustn't be, 'cos she's always telling me so. And then, when I realized that it was too hot, spicy hot I mean, all of a sudden it come over me why it was. And only why. Poison, I thought. It's to hide the taste of poison. She's done it. She's aiming to be off with that artist fellow and live in comfort on the proceeds. Well, a little of what you fancy does yer good, but there's some things goes too far. And murder's one."

"Q"

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a *NEW* police procedural by

LAWRENCE TREAT

In this newest police procedural by Lawrence Treat, Mr. American Police Procedural himself, Inspector Mitch Taylor—usually the Homicide man onstage, front and center—doesn't appear. He isn't even mentioned. But one of his sidekicks on the Homicide Squad, big Jim Bankhart, carries the ball. And he wouldn't have if Bank didn't happen to be a Ladies' Man—in spades, one might say . . .

T AS IN TRAP

by LAWRENCE TREAT

The one thing big Jim Bankhart, of the Homicide Squad, was not, was modest. And particularly not about dames. The way he strutted around the squadroom and trumpeted out his accomplishments was one of the sights of the precinct station. Occasionally the boys from the Motor Vehicles Bureau even came down the hall to watch the show.

The Homicide Squad, however, took him in stride and usually laughed him off. Which he took in good humor.

"You're jealous," Bankhart would say. "If you had a look at this new babe of mine—"

"Bring her around," somebody would snicker. And Bank would let out a roar of laughter.

"Here?" he'd say. "With a bunch like you?"

But the morning he announced he had a *pair* of dames on a string he was really in his best form.

"Kitty and Katty," he said, waving his arms. "And they—" His gestures were more descriptive than his words as he let his hands fill out the sentence. "I guess you know how any dame that gets within ten feet of me is a goner," he said, "but two of them at the same time, and sisters at that—"

He broke off when Lieu-

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tenant Decker came striding through the doorway. Decker's expression was grim. He sat down hard at the far end of the room and came straight to the point.

"We got a gang war on," he said. "One of Rinaldo's hoods was found in a parked car out in the Hillsdale section. Shot twice through the head."

Decker didn't have to say much more. They all knew that trouble had been brewing between Frenchy Lindon and Smiley Rinaldo, and that you could expect maybe a murder a week until one of the gang bosses either got knocked off or got nailed with a homicide rap. And the latter was highly unlikely.

The Homicide boys could have prophesied the miseries ahead of them. No clues. The papers would play up the crime wave, the Commissioner would take it out on the Homicide Squad, and all the squad could do was wait for some kind of break. Meanwhile, their nerves would be on edge and they'd get home late and snap at their wives for no reason the wives knew of. It had happened before and was going to happen again.

Still, they had Bank and his women to talk about, and they made book on how long he'd last with his tandem. Every day he swaggered around, and if he avoided giving exact details, his stories were far enough out to ease the tension in the squadroom.

Until about the fifth day, when Bankhart came in dragging.

"What's the matter?" Perk asked. "Your harem walk out on you?"

Bank let out a snort of laughter that rattled the walls and made the framed pictures of the last police parade shake. Then he cut himself off sharp. "No," he said. "And that's the trouble."

After the morning briefing he went into the Lieutenant's office, sat down on the wooden chair that was too small for him, and squirmed. After a few seconds Decker said, "Well?"

Bank came straight out with it. "I guess you heard about those two dames of mine. Well, last night they tried to move in on me. I had quite a time holding them off."

"You're complaining?"

"I'm telling you. Katty, she's the one that wears the green wig, at least in private—she gave me a tip. She says the Macomber gang are planning to pull a job at the Phoenix warehouse. She says they paid off the watchman to cut the juice on the alarm. They'll fake sapping him, then they'll clean

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out the joint. She says it's set for next Wednesday, midnight. Think it's on the level?"

"Do you?"

Bank had a little trouble answering that one. He'd been show-boating all week, but in his tough, private mind he figured he wasn't quite good enough to have a pair like Kitty and Katty fall all over him. So he rubbed at the hump of his big broken nose, glared at the Lieutenant, and spoke up.

"No," Bank said. "I figure it's some kind of a trick."

"Maybe," Decker said thoughtfully. "Well, the warehouse is up in the Sixth, so I'll pass the word on to them." He swung around in his chair and let it squeak. "Macomber's hooked up with Frenchy, isn't he?" Although Decker phrased his remark in the form of a question, he was merely stating a well-known fact. To Bank, anyhow.

The pinch happened too late to get in the Thursday morning paper, but the radio had the news. After the watchman had been tied up and the alarm disconnected, four men, including Macomber, had backed a truck up against the loading platform of the Phoenix warehouse and had started carting stuff out. The police, acting on "information received," had moved in and arrested the gang. Commissioner Sturm had taken personal charge of the operation and he commended his men. Bankhart's name was nowhere mentioned. Nor should it have been.

On the same day one of Frenchy's hoods was knocked off, and Decker had both Rinaldo and Frenchy picked up for questioning.

Rinaldo came in smiling. He was suave and pleasant and articulate and he promised full cooperation, although he professed to know nothing about the warehouse heist. Frenchy, appearing later in the day, blew up. He cursed out Rinaldo and said Rinaldo had started a war and had threatened to kill him, Frenchy, personally.

Frenchy, claiming his life was in danger, demanded that the police arrest Rinaldo. For answer, Decker took Frenchy by the collar and walked him out to the main reception room.

Frenchy reacted with a bellow. "I'm a citizen," he yelled. "I pay taxes, I got rights. That Rinaldo's a sleazy, two-faced, wet-nosed jerk of a double-crosser. I want protection. I want two cops on my block, twenty-four hours a day."

"If Rinaldo kills you," Decker said quietly, "we'll get him for it. And I guarantee it."

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"What good will that do me?"

"None. But it will be fine for the rest of the city."

Frenchy exploded like a hailstorm hitting a tin roof. He was beyond speech and he went out spluttering and climbed into his bullet-proof limousine parked in the courtyard. He had a couple of hoods with him, one to drive and one to sit in the rear of the car and butter him up.

Bankhart missed the show. He'd fingerprinted his two dames by letting them handle some glossy snapshots that he'd picked up somewhere and claimed were photos of himself as a four-year-old. The fingerprints were beautifully clear on the plastic surface he'd sprayed on ahead of time. He'd photographed the prints with professional competence and sent them on to Washington for identification. But he'd drawn a blank and was now combing the local files and checking out all the angles he could think of.

He figured Katty was too smooth an operator to be legitimate. It was a kind of game with him because, as he told the squad, she was almost as smart as he was. He added that she was probably as much attracted to his brains as his other qualities—a remark that was repeated, with variations, down the hall and all the way out to the clerks in the identification room.

Two days later, around half-past four, Bank was lounging around in the squadroom and dreaming up what to tell the boys the next morning. Then the phone rang and Small picked it up and listened for a moment.

"For you, Bank," he said. "Some dame wants you."

"Another one?" Bank said, playing it cool.

"With a voice like a meat grinder," Small said, hoping to get a rise out of Bank.

Bank figured it was beneath his dignity to comment. He picked up the phone and said crisply, "Bankhart here."

Katty spoke breathlessly. "Jim—help me—please! The cellar behind the grocery store on Westcott—number four one eight—please—quick—oh—" And her voice was choked off.

Bank hung up. The voice was Katty's, he was sure of that, and this was something he couldn't laugh off. On the other hand, if he told anybody about that call he'd sound like a jackass. People don't talk like that except in the movies.

He'd been in police work for fifteen years and had never heard anybody say, "Please—quick—oh!" Not to him or to any other cop. Still, you had to

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chase after every foul ball, because you never knew, until afterwards, where it was going to land.

He stared at Small, then balanced on his toes and rocked himself, as if he was thinking hard. "Little something I got to attend to," Bank said finally, and he picked up his jacket and started putting it on.

Small, not sure what Bank meant, merely said, "What?"

Bank finished putting on his jacket. "Dames," he said. "Always wanting something. Still—" He made a what-can-you-do-about-them gesture and went out. After reporting there was somebody uptown he had to question, he left. He took a bus, because this might or might not turn out to be a legitimate job. Maybe Katty just wanted his company and had hammed it up for him, or maybe she was really in trouble.

The Westcott Avenue grocery was an Italian joint that sold olive oil, pepperoni sausages, and not much else. Bank figured it was a blind for something and that he'd better watch his step.

He went around to the back. The cellar doors, flush with the ground when they were closed, were angled back. He saw about a dozen concrete steps with a steel door at the bottom. He frowned, not enthusiastic about going down there alone. The door at the bottom should have been half-rotted wood, but this one could hold off a small army. Nevertheless he went down.

He gave the door a sharp rap and shoved. It swung in easily, with a click, and in the semidarkness that contrasted with the sunlight outside, he could hardly see.

"Katty?" he called out, and stumbled inside.

He heard a groan, but all he could see was one wall and an old couch on which somebody was lying down. The groan came from the couch, so he headed for it. With his first steps the shaft of light from outside narrowed, then disappeared when the door closed.

"Katty?" he said again.

The figure on the couch laughed, and Katty had never laughed that way in her life. This was a harsh, grating laugh, as ugly as the little guy who stood up. Bank could see he had an oversized schnozz and was wearing blue jeans and a denim jacket several sizes too big for him. But in the dim light, nothing was too clear.

"Watch the paint," the voice said. "You'll get it all over you."

Bank realized he'd smeared his best pants with some red paint from a chair that had

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been in the way, but he wasn't interested in what had happened to his pants while in line of duty. He could get another pair for $9.98. Right now he was interested in the guy, not in what the guy was saying.

"Who the hell are you?" Bank demanded, and his voice hit the cellar ceiling and bounced back with an echo that tingled his eardrums.

"They call me Gilly," the guy said.

Bank snapped out his next question. "Where's Katty?"

"I don't know," Gilly answered. "Who is she?"

"What are you after? What do you want?"

"Money," the little man croaked. "I'm always after money. I never get enough of it. They paid me to wait here for you, and they paid me pretty good, because I don't like cops."

"Who paid you?" Bank asked.

"I don't know. Somebody phoned me and said to come here and meet you, and my dough would be waiting for me. So I came."

"You're a liar," Bank remarked. "You'd have picked up the dough first and then beat it."

"Sure, but you can't get out of here," Gilly said. "Try it."

Bank wheeled and ran back to the door. It was solid and airtight, with neither knob nor lock on the inside. He turned and spoke to Gilly.

"Why didn't you make a dash for it when I opened the door? You had your chance then."

"I was afraid you'd grab me. And while you were asking me questions, the door would have closed anyhow."

"What happens now?"

"Nothing. They told me the door opens two hours after it closes. They said there was no hurry about leaving. Meanwhile—"

"Meanwhile what?"

"Let's play cards." Gilly took a soiled pack from his pocket, riffled them expertly, and grinned. "Two-handed poker. For money."

Bank shook his head. "Not with you. You got a stacked deck."

"What then?"

Bank studied the small figure. Underneath that oversized jacket he had some kind of deformity. Not quite a hunchback, but a sort of curvature of the spine. In the dim light his features were unlined but ugly. He hadn't washed in a month, so Bank kept his distance.

"What do you do for a living?" Bank asked.

"I hang around bars and I

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bet. I bet that if I take a wallet with ten bucks and an identification card and put it where a cop can pick it up that the cop will keep the dough and throw away the wallet without reporting what he found. And I always win."

"You're nuts," Bank said.

"That's what they tell me, but I always win."

"Think so?" Bank said. "I'll make this bet with you: I'll bet you lied about not knowing who's paying you, and I'll bet I can get the truth out of you before we leave here."

"No dice," the little guy said. "You'd beat me up and I'd tell you something, and you wouldn't pay up because how would you know if I was telling the truth?"

Bank glared at the miserable little creep in the ill-fitting jacket. "Give me those cards," Bank said. Gilly handed them over, and Bank sat down on the stool in front of the rickety table and in the half light began to play solitaire.

He thought of how he'd tell the squad about this tomorrow morning, and then he discarded the notion. In the first place nobody would believe him, and in the second place he'd look like a complete idiot. So—tell the Lieutenant? Sure, except Bank needed proof. And the proof was right in front of him in the person of this Gilly character. Bank could bring him in on a conspiracy-to-kidnap charge and let the Lieutenant take it from there.

Bank continued to shuffle the greasy cards. After half a dozen games the little man said abruptly, "Here, take these." And he handed Bank a brand-new deck.

"Thanks," Bank said. With a sweep of his hand he brushed the dirty cards to the floor and began shuffling the new ones. He kept on playing, without speaking and without looking up.

He'd played a dozen more games without coming out once when he heard a click, and a beam of light swept across the floor.

Bank got to his feet, turned, and saw that the door was opening. At almost the same moment Gilly leaped up and sprinted for the door. Bank took a long stride, stuck out his foot, and tripped him up. The little guy went sprawling, and Bank stooped and picked him up as if he'd been a second-hand valise.

"You little runt!" Bank said. He had Gilly by the collar, but felt him begin to slip out of his oversized jacket. Crowding Gilly so that he couldn't dart off, Bank grabbed him by the arm. It was soft and skinny, and

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Gilly squealed with a kind of sullen, hopeless fury.

"You're under arrest," Bank said. "Accomplice on kidnaping and false-imprisonment charges. And believe me, I'm going to find out what this is all about."

Gilly remained silent. He let Bank lead him up the steps and into the alley behind the grocery store. There Bank turned around to see if the door had stayed open.

That was when two shots were fired.

Bank ducked sideways and landed in a crouch behind a pile of crates. At the same time, as if on signal, Gilly went scuttling down the alley in the direction of the shots.

Bank watched for a second or two, then drew his gun and stood up slowly. He saw a car at the far end of the alley, but the mud-covered license plate was illegible. As Bank stared, Gilly raced for the car. Somebody flung a door open and an arm reached out to help the little man climb inside. The car shot off with a roar of the motor.

Bank put his gun back in its holster and took a long deep breath. Then he went down to the cellar. The heavy door at the foot of the stairs was now closed and this time when he shoved it, the door remained firmly shut. Frowning, he climbed up the steps, walked out to Westcott, and entered the grocery store.

The man behind the counter had a handlebar mustache, and Bank had a hunch the guy was waiting for him and had his answers all set for the expected questions.

Bank didn't ask them. "Give me a buck's worth of pepperonis," he said.

"Sure thing. How many you want?"

"Four," Bank said, without the least idea how many you ought to get for a buck.

Maybe the clerk didn't know, either. He cut off four sausages, wrapped them in some crumpled wax paper, and stuck them in a bag. Bank handed him a buck and left.

At the nearest phone he called Katty. She answered after the first ring. "Jim?" she said, after he'd told her who he was. "I've been longing for you. Can you come up here?"

"Sure, honey. Been longing for you, too. I'll be right over."

A half hour later he rang the bell of Katty's apartment. She was smiling pleasantly as she opened the door. She was wearing a green housegown, and Kitty, a few steps behind her, had on the same kind of gown, only in red.

Bank walked in, but at the doorway to the living room he stopped short at the sight of

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Rinaldo sitting comfortably on the sofa.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Bank demanded.

Rinaldo, suave and composed, stood up. "Why ask, when we've been here together all afternoon? The four of us, spending a few friendly hours together."

"Cut the baloney," Bank said. "What do you want here?"

"I won't insult you by pretending," Rinaldo said, sitting down. "I need an alibi for this afternoon."

Bank caught on fast. "What did you pull?" he demanded. Then, answering his own question, he said, "You probably knocked off Frenchy and set me up. Sorry, but it won't work." And Bank swung around to leave.

The sharp tone of Rinaldo's voice stopped him. "Listen," he said. "You have nothing to lose by helping me out. As for being accused of consorting with a known criminal, you can say you expected to get a hot tip out of it, like the time you found out about Macomber. So you got nothing to be afraid of."

"Afraid?" Bank said contemptuously. "Me?"

"I imagine you have a pretty good sense of self-preservation," Rinaldo said, "and that you don't like people to think you're a fool, so let's look at the facts. Suppose you claim you went to four-eighteen Westcott this afternoon. Well, the place is on fire right now and there won't be much left of it, so you could hardly substantiate a cock-and-bull story about what happened there. It's a lot easier to say you were here."

"Go ahead," Bank said, figuring that the more Rinaldo talked, the more likely he was to make a slip.

"Next," Rinaldo said, "about this little man you think you saw—he doesn't even exist."

"You mean you knocked him off?"

"I never kill," Rinaldo said coldly. "And I couldn't have killed anybody this afternoon because I was playing cards right here, with the three of you. To prove it I can produce the cards we used. They'll have four sets of fingerprints on them. Yours, and ours."

"That new deck!" Bank exclaimed. "The little guy brought it here so that the three of you could handle it after I did."

"Then there's that bookcase over there in the corner," Rinaldo said. "Katty was painting it, the paint's still fresh, and I see that some of it came off on your slacks, same

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as it did on mine. And a laboratory analysis would show that the smears on yours and mine came from that same batch of paint."

"Katty used half the can," Bank said, almost to himself, "and Gilly used the rest of it on that chair."

"Finally," Rinaldo said, "I'd like to remind you of some of the things you said to the girls over the last week or so. Remember what you said to Katty when she asked you about the Commissioner? 'Him?' you said. 'Don't make me laugh. He knows more about crime than a five-year-old—but not much.' Remember saying that? Quite witty, and we have it on tape."

Bank glared at Katty. "Honey," she said, not even blushing, "they paid me for it, and a girl's got to make a living."

"What else do you figure you got on me?" Bank asked Rinaldo.

"Well," Rinaldo said, "there's a hidden camera in this room and it just took a picture of the four of us. And if you tried to find it you'd merely leave more proof that you were here."

Bank made no comment, and Rinaldo continued. "So you realize the position you're in," he said. "Admit that the four of us spent the afternoon together and you have no worries. You see, I planned this out long ago and investigated your character pretty thoroughly, which is one reason I don't even suggest sweetening your evidence with a little gift."

"Maybe you should have," Bank said angrily. But he knew he was backed up in a corner, with no way out. He hunched his big shoulders, swung around, and walked off without speaking. And when he stalked back into headquarters he even looked like a loser.

The dispatcher gave Bank the news as he came into the big anteroom just inside the front door.

"Heard what happened?" the dispatcher asked. "Somebody knocked off Frenchy and they think Rinaldo did it personally, just like he threatened. They're looking for him now."

"I can tell you where to find him," Bank said, and gave the address.

The next morning, when Bank reached the office of the Homicide Squad, the roof fell in. "Lieutenant wants to see you," the sergeant said.

Bank went into the small cubicle that Decker used for an office. The Lieutenant looked grim and tired.

"I'm reasonably sure that Rinaldo shot Frenchy," Decker

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said, "and I had a long session with Rinaldo. He claims he spent the afternoon with you and that he can prove it. What's your story?"

Bank gave it. "How bad was the fire?" he asked, after he'd finished his account. "What was found down there in the cellar?"

"Nothing. Some explosives were apparently stored there and after they blew up, nothing was left."

Bank's deep sigh rustled a couple of sheets of paper on the desk. "Boss," he said, "suppose I deny being with Rinaldo, same as any crooked cop would do, and then he comes along with that phony evidence of his. What do I look like then?" Decker didn't answer, so Bank said, "Well, what can I do?"

"Blow," Decker said. "Get out of town for a couple of days while I try to think our way out of this one. And stay away from reporters. You know damn well I'll protect you if I can, but—can I?"

"There are a couple of bullets somewheres in that alley," Bank said. "The ones that missed me."

"Even if we found them, how could we show when they were fired, or that you were there at the time? Now if you'd only been hit—"

"Sure," Bank said glumly. He made a gesture of helplessness and stood up. Then he walked out through the reception room and to the street. He took a bus to the nearest railroad station, went out to the country, and spent the day fishing. Still, you can't fish for the rest of your life, so the next morning he was back at headquarters and sitting in Decker's office.

"Find anything?" Bank asked.

Decker shook his head. "Case is stalemated. Rinaldo's the only suspect. I figure he did it, but he's got an alibi that looks tight. And nobody's going to believe that Alice-in-Wonderland story of yours."

"What about that little guy?" Bank said. "If we could find him, maybe I'd be okay."

"We've been looking," Decker said. "A little guy with curvature of the spine and an ugly mug—there's no such man in Rinaldo's organization and never was."

"Then Rinaldo imported him," Bank said.

"From where?" Bank had no answer and Decker said, "If he came from another part of the country, maybe he had an accent. What kind? Where do you think he came from?"

"No accent. He's a local boy."

"When you got the Ma-

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comber tip," Decker said, "I should have guessed they were setting you up for something. A dumb lug like you."

Bank didn't argue the point. He sat there glumly, felt the bump on his nose, and rubbed it gently. He remained seated when the phone rang and Decker picked it up.

The Lieutenant had a sour expression as he said, "Decker, Homicide." Then his face lit up and he said, "Oh, you! And why aren't you in school today?"

Bank didn't listen to the rest of the Lieutenant's remarks, and the talk was mostly from the other end of the wire. When Decker put the receiver down, he was still smiling.

"That granddaughter of mine!" he said proudly. "She's home with a cold, and you should have heard her. She's got a foghorn of a voice, you wouldn't even know it was a girl, and with a cold besides—" He broke off, and he still had that grin on his face as he said, "But they grow up, their voices change later on, usually." Then he stopped himself, and his expression changed so that he looked like the sharp, shrewd guy he really was. "Usually," he repeated, and waited for Bank to figure things out for himself.

"Suppose this was some dame with a nasal voice on her," Bank said, taking the cue. "Then we go looking for a guy and we can look for the rest of our lives."

"As we've been doing," Decker said.

"We have a pretty good line on Rinaldo's organization," Bank said. "Suppose we check up on the wives and kids and relatives. Ask a few routine questions, anything at all, but with a mike that will transmit. I'm at the other end somewheres and when I hear the right voice, that's it."

"You mean *if* you hear it."

Bank's nostrils flared and his eyes lit up. "I'll hear it," he said confidently.

He figured they'd find this dame and she'd break and that when she did, Rinaldo's scheme would fall apart. He'd not only lose his alibi, but his caper would implicate him even more deeply in the homicide than if he'd had no alibi at all.

The next couple of days were long ones for Bank. Sitting in a car and listening to voices transmitted via a mike. Going back to headquarters and listening to more voices, on tape. Listening to Balenky, to Small and Perkins and the rest of them, all of them asking questions in order to get a response. And each of them had a different line.

"We're looking for a guy

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named Oyster. Know him?"

"Oyster? Did you say Oyster?"

"No. Foster. Blond, brown eyes, weighs one-eighty."

"No, I don't know anybody like that."

Or, "We're checking up on a little accident that happened last night. What kind of a car you got, and where is it?"

Later on, the second day, Small said to somebody, "Excuse me, ma'am, but we're checking up on fire-law violations. Mind if we ask you a few questions?" And a nasal voice answered, "I wouldn't know about that. I'm not responsible, I only rent here."

Bank, sitting in a car and picking up what was said over Small's mike, let out a yell. "That's him! I mean her! Who is it? Because that voice—it's the one I been waiting to hear."

They still talk about how Bank came back to the squadroom with a whoop and did a war dance, putting on the best act he'd ever done. But, as the Lieutenant said when telling the story of how Bank identified the voice, "He just got his genders a little mixed up."

But mixed-up genders or not, there was a lot of work ahead before one Bessie Crandall, a small, ugly, dwarflike woman who was a third cousin of Rinaldo and who fancied herself as an actress, admitted the hoax in the cellar. After that, she gave the information that started the long, slow, dull, and painstaking investigation that finally resulted in the conviction of Smiley Rinaldo for homicide.

As for Jim Bankhart, he learned his lesson. "From now on," he promised, "I'm taking my dames one at a time. And as for a pair of sisters—never again!"

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a NEW suspense story by

MARY BARRETT

Miss Parsons was 60 and a spinster. She was long past being attractive to men—in fact, she never had been. She lived alone, had nothing in her house really worth stealing, and was a sick woman. Why then should a complete stranger keep following her? What did he want of her? . . .

THE MAN IN THE LEATHER JACKET

by MARY BARRETT

Miss Parsons usually left the office earlier, in order to avoid just this situation. Now, because Mr. Farrington's dictation had taken longer than usual, she found herself crushed in the elevator with the unfortunate nine-to-fivers, the ones who had to keep strict hours. There were simply too many people. That is why, at first, she failed to notice him. He did not stand out in the crowd.

There was not much to notice about him, or to mention in describing him. She would discover this later, to her distress. He looked to be in his early thirties. He was not particularly tall. He had brown hair which Miss Parsons would have thought needed cutting, though one cannot be sure these days. So many young men wear their hair long.

The elevator thumped to a stop at the first floor. The passengers poured out like bats from a cave at sunset, Miss Parsons among them.

She was only 60, but she had been thinking for some time that she might retire. Being so unpleasantly crowded in with all these people reinforced the idea. After all, she had worked for Mr. Farrington more than 20 years. Surely she had earned a rest.

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It was not that she minded the work. She was an excellent legal secretary, and proud of the fact. It was because she was so valuable to Mr. Farrington that he let her leave work early to avoid the crowds. And he always gave her a handsome bonus at New Year's.

No, she didn't mind her job. The truth was, she really should not be working. She was far from well, and her doctor warned her to avoid unnecessary strain.

Then, too, the lack of income would not be as great burden to her as it might be to someone else. Dear Brother had left her well provided for.

On the street the crowd from the elevator dispersed. Miss Parsons headed for her bus stop. That was where, for the first time, she saw him, although he registered only vaguely in her consciousness. He was not the sort of person she would have any interest in.

He appeared not to notice her either. He stood quite still, looking straight ahead, his hands in the slanted pockets of his brown leather jacket.

It was only when Miss Parsons was walking home from the bus stop that she felt the first twinge of uneasiness. At first, hearing footsteps behind her, she was afraid she had been inadvertently impolite to someone by not noticing that person on the bus. It was a short street in a stable neighborhood and although she knew no one well, she was acquainted with everyone who lived there.

She turned to see who it could be. Miss Parsons would not be deliberately rude. She was poised to say hello.

She gave a little gasp of surprise. It was not a neighbor after all. It was the young man in the brown leather jacket. He certainly did not belong on her street. What was he doing here?

It was best to ignore him. She turned and, walking faster, reached her house. She unlocked the front door and quickly shut it behind her. She walked into the living room. Cautiously she pulled the curtains apart to peek out.

There he was. She felt her heart beat faster. The impertinent young man stood on the sidewalk, just as if he had a right to be there. He faced her house, his hands in his jacket pockets again. He seemed completely at ease and unconcerned.

Why had he followed her home? Why was he standing out there? What was he waiting for? What did he want of her?

Miss Parsons put the chain lock on her front door and went into the kitchen to fix her dinner.

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She had not felt so uncomfortably anxious for a long time. At first, immediately after Brother died, she felt uneasy living alone. She had never been by herself before, and the silence and solitude made her nervous.

Gradually, however, she became accustomed to living by herself. Now, after two years alone, she even relished having no one else to be considerate of. Not that Dear Brother had been a burden. She had never complained, even silently. How could she, when he took such good care of her? It was just that now she enjoyed being able to eat when she wanted to eat, to watch the television programs that she enjoyed most.

While Brother was with her there was no question of whose wishes were paramount. After all, he was the man of the house. It was his house, in fact. Her salary was only a pleasant supplement to their income, allowing her to buy certain luxuries for herself such as well-tailored suits and the white gloves she liked so much. It was Brother's income that had bought this house in the best part of town and that kept them living so comfortably.

Brother had always been vague about the source of his income. All she knew was that he was "in business." Beyond that she had never inquired. Brother was not the sort of person of whom one asked personal questions.

He had taken good care of her. She knew that. Also, she knew without bitterness that he was the only person in the world who had ever loved her. Even so, her life was easier now that he was gone.

But oh, how she wished he were here again at this moment! The man in the leather jacket had brought back all her old apprehensions. She felt terribly vulnerable and terribly alone. What if the man were a burglar, watching her comings and goings, waiting for a chance to break in?

Well, she decided, she would just put him out of her mind. She was safe here. The house was well secured against intruders. Furthermore, he had no way of knowing that she was a defenseless woman living alone. For all he knew she still had a protector.

In spite of these self-assurances Miss Parsons spent a restless night, filled with uneasy dreams. In the morning she was tired and a little dizzy. Perhaps she should take two of her blood-pressure pills instead of the usual one? No. She had better stick to one. Miss Parsons was accustomed to following orders.

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By the time she was dressed and ready for the day Miss Parsons convinced herself that she had exaggerated the importance of the man in the leather jacket. It could have been mere coincidence, after all. Or it could have been some sort of odd mistake. Perhaps he had mistaken her for someone else, someone of more importance.

It was with these comforting thoughts that Miss Parsons set out for the bus stop. When she arrived she saw that only one other person was there. All her shaky self-confidence evaporated instantly. It was the man in the leather jacket. He stood in his customary pose—hands in slanted pockets, staring straight ahead at nothing.

Miss Parsons could feel her heart pounding. The palms of her hands were damp with fear.

She could no longer fool herself into believing this was mere coincidence. The man did not belong here. He was as out of place at this bus stop, in this neighborhood, as a weed in a rose garden. No, he was here because of her. He had singled her out for his attention for some obscure reason she could not begin to guess.

The bus pulled in to the curb. She got on. Fumbling, she managed somehow to get her fare into the box.

The young man took a seat behind her. Through the entire trip Miss Parsons was unpleasantly aware of his presence. He got off at her stop. He went up in the same elevator, got off at her floor, and walked down the hall behind her. All this without giving a sign that he noticed her at all.

For the first time in her working life Miss Parsons did everything wrong that morning. Mr. Farrington had to repeat his dictation, and this to the infallible Miss Parsons. It was unprecedented. He looked at her closely, puzzled. She certainly was in a strange state. What could be the matter with the woman? She was preoccupied. She looked sick. Her coloring was an unhealthy gray.

"Miss Parsons, if you're not feeling well you should go home and rest."

"I'm all right, Mr. Farrington," she said.

Should she tell Mr. Farrington about the man in the leather jacket? No. It would only sound silly to him—the imaginings of a frustrated old maid. He probably wouldn't believe her.

After all, there was no reason for a man to be interested in her. She was long past being physically attractive. In fact, she had never been pretty, and men never had taken to her. Only Brother had

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cared for her. If she complained now about being bothered by a man, Mr. Farrington would only think she was the victim of some spinsterish delusion.

She sat at her desk feeling dizzy. The shorthand swam in front of her eyes, the symbols looking like meaningless nonsense.

She put the paper in her typewriter with the carbon backward and was halfway down the page before she noticed the mistake.

She blinked back tears of frustration and fatigue.

Mr. Farrington, walking past, was alarmed. He saw that she was near to collapse. He put a kind hand on her shoulder.

"Miss Parsons, you really must go home and get some rest. Take the rest of the week off, if you like."

"I believe I will, after all, Mr. Farrington. Thank you."

She got on the elevator. Inevitably so did the man in the leather jacket. She had expected nothing else. Still, she went cold with panic.

Miss Parsons was losing control. She was afraid she might do something wildly inappropriate—scream aloud or fall on the elevator floor in a fit. She clamped her teeth together so firmly that her jaws ached. She fought back a wave of nausea.

She walked home from the bus stop with the deliberate footsteps sounding behind her. She had reached her limit. She could take no more. With courage born of terror Miss Parsons turned and faced her tormentor.

"What do you want of me?" she asked, her voice shaking.

"I beg your pardon?" the man said, as if he had never seen her before.

"Why are you following me?" Miss Parsons begged.

"*I'm* following *you?*" he said, as if the idea were too preposterous even to consider.

"Oh," Miss Parsons said. She sounded like a hurt child, whimpering.

She went in her house and chain-locked the door. A glance out the window showed what she knew it would. The man was standing there, facing her house, staring into space. Was he carrying a gun? Was that why he always kept his hands in his jacket pockets?

She felt really sick now. Her heart raced. She could taste terror in her mouth.

She called the police.

"I want to report a trespasser," she said.

The policemen came promptly. There were two of them, polite and efficient.

"Where did you see the trespasser?" one of them asked.

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"He's standing outside, staring at my house."

"No one was there when we came in," the second policeman said.

Miss Parsons looked out the window. It was true. The man was gone.

"He has followed me for two days," she said, unconvincingly.

The second policeman was taking notes in a little book. He looked up and the two policemen exchanged a clearly skeptical look.

"What does he look like?" the first policeman asked.

"Well, he looks about average," Miss Parsons said, fully aware of sounding inadequate. "He has long hair and he wears a brown leather jacket."

"He followed you?" the second policeman asked, glancing up from his notebook.

"Yes. He goes wherever I go." Miss Parsons was fighting to keep her voice steady.

"But he hasn't actually approached you with an obscene proposal, or anything like that?" asked the first policeman.

"No," Miss Parsons admitted reluctantly.

The second policeman snapped his notebook shut. "We'll search for him. But I'm afraid we can't charge him even if we do find him. He hasn't actually done anything wrong."

"Yes. I see that," Miss Parsons said. She fought back the nausea of despair.

In ten minutes the policemen were back.

"We've searched the neighborhood. The man isn't here," one said.

"Thank you. Thank you for coming," Miss Parsons said in a low voice.

She closed the door behind them and leaned against it, gulping deep breaths of air. Now she was really alone, with no hope of rescue or protection.

The policemen obviously thought she had imagined the entire episode, thought she was a silly old maid who fantasied a man pursuing her.

Could that possibly be true? Could she have invented a menace from some deep unconscious need for male attention? She had read of such things. But it was not in her character. Miss Parsons was not usually an imaginative person. But then, she was getting older. Also, no other explanation suggested itself.

There was no reason on earth for anyone to take an interest in her. Her life was made up of small routines. She went to work. She went to the grocery store. She had no friends. Brother had always

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discouraged her from getting to know anyone. Her past was uneventful and her present was circumscribed. The events of the past two days were the most exciting she had ever experienced, and Miss Parsons did not welcome the change.

If she was not imagining the entire situation, then what? If the man was a robber, he was in for a disappointment. Nothing she owned was valuable to anyone else. Her furniture was too old to be attractive, not old enough to qualify as antiques. She owned no expensive jewelry. Anyway, if robbery were the man's intention, surely he was proceeding in a most unorthodox manner. So far as she knew, robbers did not reveal themselves openly to their victims. Whatever else you might say against the man in the leather jacket, he was not furtive.

Miss Parsons dragged herself to bed, her thoughts whirling uselessly in her head. She did not even try to eat supper.

When she awoke she was more tired than ever. There was no question of going to work today. Her hands shook badly. She looked old and gray.

Even if she had been well, it might be wise to stay at home, she told herself. If she broke her routine, the man might give up his strange pursuit. If she stayed home from work for a few days he might abandon his obscure purpose.

That thought gave her an idea. Could that, in fact, be his purpose, she wondered? Could he, for some reason, want her to stay away from her job? Perhaps want her to quit work entirely?

The possibility, inexplicable though it was, brought with it a profound relief. She certainly could oblige him on that score—she had been planning to retire soon anyway. For the first time since her ordeal had begun, Miss Parsons enjoyed the feeling that there was something positive she could do to end it. She felt in control of her life again.

She actually hummed a tune as she put water on for tea.

The day was sunny and pleasantly warm. She would take her shopping cart and go to the neighborhood grocery store a block away.

Miss Parsons walked briskly, pulling the cart behind her. Then, over the sound of the rubber wheels on the sidewalk, she heard another sound which, unconsciously, she had been prepared for—the sound of footsteps behind her. She did not even bother to look. She knew what she would see. Her good mood collapsed like a punctured balloon.

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The man in the leather jacket followed her into the store. At each place she stopped, he stopped too, not far away. Miss Parsons went up one aisle and down another, taking cans and packages from the shelves. The man made no pretense of buying anything. Hands in jacket pockets as usual, he simply stared at package labels.

Panic tightened Miss Parsons' throat muscles and sent her heart racing. She thought she might faint. Had she taken her blood-pressure pill this morning? She couldn't remember.

Her knees shaking, she wheeled her cart around and pushed it to the checkout counter. Only half of her grocery list was finished, but never mind that. She had to get away from that silent, menacing man, back to the safety of her house.

No one was ahead of her. She leaned over the counter.

"Miss," she whispered to the checkout girl, "would you please call the manager? That man is following me—he's been following me for days. You can see he's not buying anything. He's only here to torment me. Please report him."

The checkout girl looked at Miss Parsons with undisguised alarm. Had the old woman flipped her lid?

"There isn't any man," she said, trying to sound calm. "We're the only persons around here."

Miss Parsons felt as if she were drowning. She looked about and saw that what the girl said was true. The man in the leather jacket was gone, probably had left through the rear service entrance. In this neighborhood the manager did not worry about robbery and often left the rear door unlocked.

Miss Parsons paid and went out. Not twenty feet from the store she heard the inevitable footsteps. Following her again.

Terror and despair hit her like a sonic boom. Now, she knew, there was no hope. No hope at all. The man didn't care whether or not she went to work. He didn't care that she was aging and unattractive. He didn't care that she owned nothing of value. His motives were his own, and were beyond the reach of reason.

No matter what she did, he followed her. He would always follow her, waiting for the right moment to do whatever it was he wanted to do to her. How would it come, she wondered? Would he shoot her? Stab her with a knife? Or, worse, would he abuse her physically in a way too horrible even to imagine?

A picture flashed through

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Miss Parsons' mind of herself helpless, tied down and gagged, while the man in the leather jacket committed some unspeakable torture. But why? Why had he chosen her?

Miss Parsons did not leave her house again. She stayed indoors with the shades drawn, hardly knowing if it was day or night. Gradually her food supply dwindled. It didn't matter. There was no question of her going out to the grocery store. Anyway, her appetite was not good. She had lost weight. Her dress hung on her like a shapeless sack.

Once in a while she drew on her last reserve of courage and peeked out the front window. It was always the same, as she knew it would be. The man in the leather jacket stood, his hands in his pockets, waiting.

Now Miss Parsons was waiting too. She didn't know what her fate would be. She only knew that she was eager to have it done with.

She knew it was useless to call the police again. Even if they bothered to come, the man in the leather jacket would simply disappear as he had before.

There was nothing to do now but wait for whatever inevitable end the man had in store for her. Not for a moment did she doubt that, whatever precautions she took, he would succeed. His unwavering patience, his unbelievable perseverance, made him seem inexorable. Whatever he wanted to happen would happen.

Still, when the moment came, Miss Parsons was unprepared. It was late evening. She pulled the curtains aside to look out. In the dim twilight she could see that, for the first time, the man was not staring idly into space. Instead, he seemed to be gazing directly into her eyes.

Never had she seen such an expression of bare hatred. How could she have inspired that feeling in a man she didn't even know? Her heartbeat raced. Now the man was moving, moving toward her front door. Whatever horrible fate he intended for her, Miss Parsons would soon know.

He knocked. Three times. Miss Parsons stood pressed against the inside of the door, trembling with terror.

Again he knocked, firmly, resolutely.

Miss Parsons put her ear against the door. She could hear him on the other side, breathing heavily like some animal. Her legs could hardly hold her now. Her knees were shaking badly.

Again he knocked. Again.

And again.

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Miss Parsons' breathing was fast and shallow.

"Please," she gasped, begging for mercy which she knew would never come. "Please!"

Again he knocked.

Miss Parsons knew the knocking would last forever, the man would never leave.

Sharp pain shot through her chest. She cried aloud, involuntarily. This was what the doctor had warned her about. Her heart had taken more strain than it could endure. Again she cried aloud, her voice shrill with pain.

On the other side of the door the man heard and smiled with satisfaction.

There was a loud thud as Miss Parsons fell to the floor.

The listening man heard, first, the thud of the body hitting the floor, then the sudden silence.

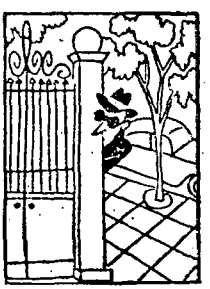
He waited. He knew of Miss Parsons' bad heart, knew she was probably dead.

"There," he said finally. "That's done. The old woman in exchange for this."

He looked down at his hands, disfigured and maimed.

"On that last job her brother made me tackle the safe. When the whole thing exploded in my hands he ran off and left me to take the rap, dead for all he knew. Well, I served my time. He died before I could get out and get to him. This is just as good, though. His precious sister for him. Now we're even."

The man in the leather jacket put his hands in his pockets and walked away.



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a **HERCULE POIROT detective story by**

AGATHA CHRISTIE

Holiday or no holiday, in London or out, Hercule Poirot finds murder wherever he goes. "Le crime," *he reminds us,* "il est partout." *And this time, in the little country town of Market Basing,* le crime *is a locked-room mystery.*

What a detective Hercule Poirot is! But we should never forget Inspector Japp's almost casual remark (and be forever grateful for its truth): "*You'd have been a holy terror if you'd taken to crime, M. Poirot.*" *And how!*

THE MARKET BASING MYSTERY

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

"After all, there's nothing like the country, is there?" said Inspector Japp, breathing in heavily through his nose and out through his mouth in the most approved fashion.

Poirot and I applauded the sentiment heartily. It had been the Scotland Yard Inspector's idea that we should all go for the weekend to the little country town of Market Basing. When off duty, Japp was an ardent botanist, and discoursed on minute flowers possessed of unbelievably lengthy Latin names (somewhat strangely pronounced) with an enthusiasm even greater than that he gave to his cases.

"Nobody knows us, and we know nobody," explained Japp. "That's the idea."

This was not to prove quite the case, however, for the local constable happened to have been transferred from a village fifteen miles away where an arsenical poisoning had brought him into contact with the Scotland Yard man. However, his delighted recognition of the great man only enhanced Japp's sense of well-being, and as we sat down to breakfast on Sunday morning in the parlor of the village inn, with the sun shining, and tendrils of honeysuckle thrusting themselves in at the window, we were all in

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the best of spirits. The bacon and eggs were excellent, the coffee not so good, but passable and boiling hot.

"This is the life," said Japp. "When I retire, I shall have a little place in the country. Far from crime, like this!"

"*Le crime, il est partout,*" remarked Poirot, helping himself to a neat square of bread and frowning at a sparrow which had balanced itself impertinently on the window-sill.

"Lord," said Japp, stretching himself backward, "I believe I could manage another egg, and perhaps a rasher or two of bacon. What do you say, Captain?"

"I'm with you," I returned heartily. "What about you, Poirot?"

Poirot shook his head. "One must not so replenish the stomach that the brain refuses to function," he remarked.

"I'll risk replenishing the stomach a bit more," laughed Japp. "I take a large size in stomachs; and by the way, you're getting stout yourself, M. Poirot. Here, miss, eggs and bacon twice."

At that moment, however, an imposing form blocked the doorway. It was Constable Pollard.

"I hope you'll excuse me troubling the Inspector, gentlemen, but I'd be glad of his advice."

"I'm on my holiday," said Japp hastily. "No work for me. What is the case?"

"Gentleman up at Leigh Hall—shot himself—through the head."

"Well, they will do it," said Japp prosaically. "Debt or a woman, I suppose. Sorry I can't help you, Pollard."

"The point is," said the constable, "that he can't have shot himself. Leastways that's what Dr. Giles says."

Japp put down his cup. "Can't have shot himself? What do you mean?"

"That's what Dr. Giles says," repeated Pollard. "He says it's impossible. He's puzzled to death, the door being locked on the inside and the window bolted; but he sticks to it that the man couldn't have committed suicide."

That settled it. The further supply of bacon and eggs was waved aside and a few minutes later we were all walking as fast as we could in the direction of Leigh House, Japp eagerly questioning the constable.

The name of the deceased was Walter Protheroe; he was a man of middle age and something of a recluse. He had come to Market Basing eight years ago and rented Leigh House, a rambling old mansion

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fast falling into ruin. He lived in a corner of it, his wants attended to by a housekeeper whom he had brought with him. Miss Clegg was her name, and she was a very superior woman and highly thought of in the village. Just lately Mr. Protheroe had had visitors staying with him, a Mr. and Mrs. Parker from London.

This morning, unable to get a reply when she went to call her master, and finding the door locked, Miss Clegg became alarmed, and telephoned for the police and the doctor. Constable Pollard and Dr. Giles had arrived at the same time. Their united efforts had succeeded in breaking down the oak door of the bedroom.

Mr. Protheroe was lying on the floor, shot through the head, and the pistol was clasped in his right hand. It looked a clear case of suicide.

After examining the body, however, Dr. Giles became clearly perplexed, and finally he drew the constable aside and communicated his perplexities to him; whereupon Pollard had at once thought of Japp. Leaving the doctor in charge, he had hurried down to the Inn.

By the time the constable's recital was over we had arrived at Leigh House, a big desolate residence surrounded by an unkempt, weed-ridden garden. The front door was open, and we passed at once into the hall and from there into a small morning-room from which we heard the sound of voices.

Four people were in the room: a somewhat flashily dressed man with a shifty, unpleasant face to whom I took an immediate dislike; a woman of much the same type, though handsome in a coarse fashion; another woman dressed in neat black who stood apart from the rest, and whom I took to be the housekeeper; and a tall man dressed in sporting tweeds, with a clever, capable face, and who was clearly in command of the situation.

"Dr. Giles," said the constable, "this is Detective Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard, and his two friends."

The doctor greeted us and made us known to Mr. and Mrs. Parker. Then we accompanied him upstairs. Pollard, in obedience to a sign from Japp, remained below, on guard over the household. The doctor led us upstairs and along a passage. A door was open at the end; splinters hung from the hinges and the door itself had crashed to the floor inside the room.

We went in. The body was still lying on the floor. Mr. Protheroe had been a man of middle age, bearded, with hair gray at the temples. Japp went

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and knelt by the body.

"Why couldn't you leave it as you found it?" he grumbled.

The doctor shrugged. "We thought it a clear case of suicide."

"Hm!" said Japp. "Bullet entered the head behind the left ear."

"Exactly," said the doctor. "Clearly impossible for him to have fired it himself. He'd have had to twist his hand right round his head. It couldn't have been done."

"Yet you found the pistol clasped in his right hand? Where is the gun, by the way?"

The doctor nodded to the table.

"But it wasn't clasped in his hand," he said. "It was inside the hand, but the fingers weren't closed over it."

"Put there afterward," said Japp; "that's clear enough." He was examining the weapon. "One cartridge fired. We'll test it for fingerprints, but I doubt if we'll find any but yours, Dr. Giles. How long has he been dead?"

"Sometime last night. I can't give the time to an hour or so, as those wonderful doctors in detective stories do. Roughly, he's been dead about twelve hours."

So far Poirot had not made a move of any kind. He had remained by my side, watching Japp at work and listening to his questions. Only, from time to time, he had sniffed the air very delicately, as if puzzled. I too had sniffed, but could detect nothing to arouse interest. The air seemed perfectly fresh and devoid of odor. And yet, from time to time, Poirot continued to sniff it dubiously, as though his keener nose detected something I had missed.

Now, as Japp moved away from the body, Poirot knelt down by it. He took no interest in the wound. I thought at first that he was examining the fingers of the hand that had held the pistol, but in a minute I saw that it was a handkerchief carried in the right coat sleeve that interested him. Mr. Protheroe was dressed in a dark gray lounge suit. Finally Poirot got up from his knees, but his eyes still strayed back to the handkerchief as though puzzled.

Japp called to him to come and help lift the door. Seizing my opportunity I too knelt down, and taking the handkerchief from the sleeve scrutinized it minutely. It was a perfectly plain handkerchief of white cambric; there was no mark or stain on it of any kind. I replaced it, shaking my head and confessing myself baffled.

The others had raised the

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door. I realized that they were hunting for the key. They looked in vain.

"That settles it," said Japp. "The window's shut and bolted on the inside. The murderer left by the door, locking it and taking the key with him. He thought it would be accepted that Protheroe had locked himself in and shot himself, and that the absence of the key would not be noticed. You agree, M. Poirot?"

"I agree, yes; but it would have been simpler and better to slip the key back inside the room under the door. Then it would look as though it had fallen from the lock."

"Ah, well, you can't expect everybody to have the bright ideas that you have. You'd have been a holy terror if you'd taken to crime. Any remarks to make, M. Poirot?"

Poirot, it seemed to me, was somewhat at a loss. He looked round the room and remarked mildly and almost apologetically, "He smoked a lot, this monsieur."

True enough, the grate was filled with cigarette stubs, as was an ashtray that stood on a small table near the big armchair.

"He must have got through about twenty cigarettes last night," remarked Japp. Stooping, he examined the contents of the grate carefully, then transferred his attention to the ashtray. "They're all the same kind," he announced, "and smoked by the same man. There's nothing there, M. Poirot."

"I did not suggest that there was," murmured my friend.

"Ha," cried Japp, "what's this?" He pounced on something bright and glittering that lay on the floor near the dead man. "A broken cuff link. I wonder who this belongs to. Dr. Giles, I'd be obliged if you'd go down and send up the housekeeper."

"What about the Parkers? He's very anxious to leave the house—says he's got urgent business in London."

"I daresay. It'll have to get on without him. By the way things are going it's likely that there'll be some urgent business down here for him to attend to! Send up the housekeeper, and don't let either of the Parkers give you and Pollard the slip. Did any of the household come in here this morning?"

The doctor reflected. "No, they stood outside in the hallway while Pollard and I came in."

"Sure of that?"

"Absolutely certain."

The doctor departed on his mission.

"Good man, that," said Japp

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approvingly. "Some of these sporting doctors are first-class fellows. Well, I wonder who shot this chap. It looks like one of the three in the house. I hardly suspect the housekeeper. She's had eight years to shoot him in if she wanted to. I wonder who these Parkers are? They're not a prepossessing-looking couple."

Miss Clegg appeared at this juncture. She was a thin gaunt woman with neat gray hair parted in the middle, very staid and calm in manner. Nevertheless there was an air of efficiency about her which commanded respect. In answer to Japp's questions she explained that she had really been with the dead man for fourteen years. He had been a generous and considerate master. She had never seen Mr. and Mrs. Parker until three days ago, when they arrived unexpectedly to stay. She was of the opinion that they had asked themselves—the master had certainly not seemed pleased to see them. The cuff links which Japp showed her had not belonged to Mr. Protheroe—she was sure of that.

Questioned about the pistol, she said that she believed her master had a weapon of that kind. He had kept it locked up. She had seen it once some years ago, but could not say whether this was the same one. She had heard no shot last night, but that was not surprising, as it was a big rambling house, and her rooms and those prepared for the Parkers were at the other end of the building. She did not know what time Mr. Protheroe had gone to bed—he was still up when she retired at half-past nine. It was not his habit to go at once to bed when he went to his room. Usually he would sit up half the night, reading and smoking. He was a heavy smoker.

Then Poirot interposed a question. "Did your master sleep with his window open or shut, as a rule?"

Miss Clegg considered. "It was usually open—at any rate, at the top."

"Yet now it is closed. Can you explain that?"

"No, unless he felt a draft and shut it."

Japp asked her a few more questions and then dismissed her. Next he interviewed the Parkers separately. Mrs. Parker was inclined to be hysterical and tearful; Mr. Parker was full of bluster and abuse. He denied that the cuff link was his, but as his wife had previously recognized it, this hardly improved matters for him; and as he had also denied ever having been in Protheroe's room, Japp considered that he had sufficient evidence to apply for a warrant.

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Leaving Pollard in charge, Japp bustled back to the village and got into telephone communication with headquarters. Poirot and I strolled back to the Inn.

"You're unusually quiet," I said. "Doesn't the case interest you?"

"*Au contraire*, it interests me enormously. But it puzzles me also."

"The motive is obscure," I said thoughtfully, "but I'm certain that Parker's a bad lot. The case against him seems pretty clear but for the lack of motive, and that may come out later."

"Nothing struck you as being especially significant, although overlooked by Japp?"

I looked at him curiously. "What have you got up your sleeve, Poirot?"

"What did the dead man have up his sleeve?"

"Oh, that handkerchief!"

"Exactly, the handkerchief."

"A sailor carries his handkerchief in his sleeve," I said thoughtfully.

"An excellent point, Hastings, though not the one I had in mind.

"Anything else?"

"Yes, over and over again I go back to the smell of cigarette smoke."

"I didn't smell any," I cried wonderingly.

"No more did I, *cher ami.*"

I looked earnestly at him. It is so difficult to know when Poirot is pulling one's leg, but he seemed thoroughly in earnest and was frowning to himself.

The inquest took place two days later. In the meantime other evidence had come to light. A tramp had admitted that he had climbed over the wall into the Leigh House garden, where he often slept in a shed that was left unlocked. He declared that at twelve o'clock he had heard two men quarreling loudly in a room on the first floor. One was demanding a sum of money; the other was angrily refusing. Concealed behind a bush, he had seen the two men as they passed and repassed the lighted window. One he knew well as being Mr. Protheroe, the owner of the house; the other he identified positively as Mr. Parker.

It was clear now that the Parkers had come to Leigh House to blackmail Protheroe, and when later it was discovered that the dead man's real name was Wendover, and that he had been a lieutenant in the Navy and had been concerned in the blowing up of the first-class cruiser *Merrythought*, the case seemed to be rapidly

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clearing. It was supposed that Parker, cognizant of the part Wendover had played, had tracked him down and demanded hush money which the other had refused to pay. In the course of the quarrel Wendover drew his revolver, and Parker snatched it from him and shot him, subsequently endeavoring to give it the appearance of suicide.

Parker was committed for trial, reserving his defense. We had attended the police-court proceedings. As we left, Poirot nodded his head.

"It must be so," he murmured to himself. "Yes, it must be so. I will delay no longer."

He went into the post office and wrote off a note which he dispatched by special messenger. I did not see to whom it was addressed. Then we returned to the Inn.

Poirot was restless, going to and from the window.

"I await a visitor," he explained. "It cannot be—surely it cannot be that I am mistaken? No, here she is."

To my utter astonishment, in another minute Miss Clegg walked into the room. She was less calm than usual and was breathing hard as though she had been running. I saw the fear in her eyes as she looked at Poirot.

"Sit down, mademoiselle," he said kindly. "I guessed rightly, did I not?"

For answer she burst into tears.

"Why did you do it?" asked Poirot gently. "Why?"

"I loved him so," she answered. "I was nursemaid to him when he was a little boy. Oh, be merciful to me!"

"I will do all I can. But you understand that I cannot permit an innocent man to hang—even though he is an unpleasing scoundrel."

She sat up and said in a low voice, "Perhaps in the end I could not have, either. Do whatever must be done."

Then, rising, she hurried from the room.

"Did she shoot him?" I asked, utterly bewildered.

Poirot smiled and shook his head.

"He shot himself. Do you remember that he carried his handkerchief in his *right* sleeve? That showed me that he was left-handed. Fearing exposure, after his stormy interview with Mr. Parker, he shot himself. In the morning Miss Clegg came to call him as usual and found him lying dead. As she has just told us, she had known him from a little boy, and was filled with fury against the Parkers who had driven him to this shameful death. She regarded them as

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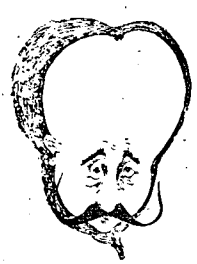
murderers, and then suddenly she saw a chance of making them suffer for the deed they had inspired. She alone knew that he was left-handed. She changed the pistol to his right hand, closed and bolted the window, dropped the cuff link she had picked up in one of the downstairs rooms, and went out, locking the door and removing the key."

"Poirot," I said, in a burst of enthusiasm, "you are magnificent. All that from the one little clue of the handkerchief!"

"And the cigarette smoke. If the window had been closed, and all those cigarettes smoked, the room ought to have been full of the smell of stale tobacco. Instead, it was perfectly fresh, so I deduced at once that the window must have been open all night, and only closed in the morning, and that gave me a very interesting line of speculation. I could conceive of no circumstances under which a murderer could want to shut the window. It would be to his advantage to leave it open, and pretend that the murderer had escaped that way, if the theory of suicide did not go down. Of course, the tramp's evidence, when I heard it, confirmed my suspicions. He could never have overheard that conversation unless the window had been open."

"Splendid!" I said heartily. "Now, what about some tea?"

"Spoken like a true Englishman," said Poirot with a sigh. "I suppose it is not likely that I could obtain here a glass of *sirop?*"



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a NEW crime story by

MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

Why does a mass murderer kill? Here is the confession of a man guilty of multiple murder, a man who insists he came from a happy home, who had a happy childhood, who seems normal and well-adjusted, who says he has no neurosis or psychosis or even an occasional nightmare. Then why does he kill elderly women? Because, as he is willing to admit, he has a mission—his private and personal mission on earth . . . a strange story . . .

MURDER BY PERSON OR PERSONS UNKNOWN

by MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

Of the 21 women I have killed so far, I doubt if more than ten were missed at all. Every one of them was away from her home, most of them probably were widows or divorcees or spinsters who lived alone, they were all elderly and if they had ever been employed they were now likely to be retired. Besides, no one on earth can connect me in any way with any of them. If I knew the names of any of them I have forgotten them.

I am night security officer at an intrastate and interstate bus station. (No, that will not incriminate me; my job is not exactly that, but near enough to it.) For three years now, when in the hours between midnight and dawn I have noticed a woman of this type waiting for a bus—buses are few in those hours, and the waiting room is often almost empty—I have marked her down as my next victim.

I go up to her—usually she is sitting wearily next to her baggage, sometimes trying to read but too tired to keep at it—and say to her politely,

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"Madam, it's a long wait. Would you like a cup of coffee?" (Of course I occasionally approach men and young women too, but all they get *is* a cup of coffee.)

I am over six feet tall, not bad-looking, about the age to be the woman's son if she ever had one, clean-shaven with short hair, which is what this kind of person likes, and my trim uniform is becoming. Altogether, I am a welcome sight to her. People with plenty of money don't travel by bus, and anyway by this time the food counter is closed. I have never had one say no.

In my little office I have an electric plate. I ask about sugar and milk, and bring out a steaming cup of good strong coffee, none of your instant stuff. She drinks it eagerly when it is cool enough, thanks me profusely, and returns the cup.

I know when the next bus will leave. Everything has been calculated carefully. It is a slow poison; the effects will begin when the woman is on the bus and the bus is well on its way. She might even have reached her hometown, if it is near, but hardly ever her home address. It wouldn't matter either way; she will collapse and die very far from me, and even if an autopsy is performed and the poison is discovered, nobody will know if it was suicide or murder, and if murder, where and when and by whom it was committed. The chances are that there is nobody who knows or cares where she has been anyway.

The only other possibility—that somebody in this city knows her, that she was visiting friends or relatives who will be worried by not hearing from her and in time even tell the police of her hometown that she is missing—this possibility is very slight. Suppose the worst: suppose that because of her particular metabolism the poison works too fast, that she dies on the bus and the driver reports where she boarded it, what then? Who is to know that she had a cup of coffee just before? The cup has long ago been meticulously washed.

You will say, but there were other passengers waiting; won't one or more of them, reading in the paper of the sudden death of a fellow passenger, remember the friendly security officer who had brought them coffee, and direct suspicion at me? What if they do? I am on amiable terms with the police in this area; if they questioned me I would tell them yes, of course, I did give her coffee to keep her awake—gave it to all the other passengers also waiting; if the poison that killed

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her was in that, she must have inserted it herself after I had left her. But this situation has never happened yet.

So you will say, why? Why do I do it? I'll tell you.

I say "I'll tell you," but all I mean is that for my own satisfaction I'll relate the story in these pages. My notebook is just as well concealed as the poison, or the manner in which I secured it three years ago; I'm not fool enough to leave either one in the bus station when I'm off duty, and nobody will ever find either while I'm alive.

When I'm dead I don't care if the whole story is made public; like Jack the Ripper or other mass murderers I shall have earned a sort of immortality, and there is no one near to me to be shocked or hurt by it. (In fact, except for my comparative youth and a bit higher income, I myself am practically in the same position as the women I have killed—and shall continue to kill.)

So, dear confidant—let me put it whimsically—here is the reason why I, who have never in my life received so much as a ticket for traffic violation, and in some sense am a police officer myself, have become a murderer. A mass murderer.

I am not the product of a broken home. My parents were good, kindly people, and they gave me a happy childhood. I have never been married, or badly disappointed in love—and besides, if that were the case, why should I choose only elderly women to kill? I am a perfectly normal, well-adjusted man, who eats well, sleeps well, enjoys sex, never has nightmares, and as far as I know I have no neurosis whatever. (That boyhood belief that I possessed psychic powers was just nonsense, and long forgotten.) None of the standard explanations applies to me. If by some weird accident I were ever caught, my lawyer would have the devil of a time trying to argue that I was insane.

But didn't I have a grandmother? Of course I did.

We don't believe in witches any more, but if there ever were any, my father's mother was one, and a black one at that.

Now don't jump to conclusions. I am not killing women because they remind me of my paternal grandmother. She was always good to me, and when I was a child I loved her. I don't think she loved anyone else, not even her only son, my father. She seemed to feel there was a special bond between us, and she used to talk to me as if I were grown up.

"You see," she said—I was eight or nine—"people value mere life too highly."

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She fixed on me those fierce little black eyes under the wide high forehead and the dark hair that showed only a trace of gray when she died at 75.

"It would be a benevolence to make the old and lonely and sad understand that they need not go on living, that they can shuffle off the burden of life. Always remember that, Gerald."

(My name is not Gerald.)

No, you are on the wrong track again. I do not kill these women to obey my grandmother's injunction. She was pro-suicide, not, as I am, pro-murder. I have my own mission.

Did it ever occur to you that, far from being relieved of "the burden of life," as my grandmother put it, these solitary bereft women whom I have sent to a sure and painless death (for, believe me, I would not cause any creature to suffer: the poison I use only puts them into a slumber from which they never awaken) are for the first time in their barren lives fulfilling a function which all humanity owes to the earth that has borne and nourished them?

Let me explain.

Suppose these women—and the others I will kill—had gone peacefully back to their drab existences, and in the course of too many years had died of some lingering disease or in some outburst of violence. They would then be buried (this kind of person is seldom or never cremated), and the material that made up their bodies would return to nourish the hungry soil. Why wait, meanwhile polluting earth as we all do? In my philosophy, when the faltering fabric no longer can contribute even what little it gave in youth to society, its plain duty is to make as soon as possible the only other contribution of which it is capable.

My grandmother was wrong. Nothing would ever have persuaded these women to carry out that duty by their own decision. I had to perform it for them, for their own best good and for the good of us all.

But why only women? Because so many more men do make away with themselves: look at the statistics. And so many women who do attempt it bungle the effort. My way is more merciful than that.

Is life so—

No—that knife—

"What happened?" Dr. Liggett asked urgently.

The nurse was near to tears.

"I left him only for a minute," she said. "I thought everything was safe. I had no idea he had stolen that knife."

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"Had he been fantasying again?"

"I think so. All morning he was muttering about being some sort of guard or policeman whose obligation it was to find old women and eliminate them. 'For their own best good,' he kept repeating. 'For the good of us all and of the earth that nourishes us.' "

"That same old hallucination."

"I suppose so."

Dr. Liggett sighed.

"Well, Miss Farquhar, don't reproach yourself. These things do happen in a place like this. And you've seen his file—he was actually the fifth of his immediate family to be committed here within three generations."

"Starting with his paternal grandmother?"

"With her, yes. Two of his cousins are still in Building B. And his sister died here a few months before your appointment."

"Isn't it sad that a man like Mr. Gorham who had everything—good looks, a healthy body, a brilliant mind—"

"And all that money. Or he couldn't have afforded this place," Dr. Liggett said dryly.

"That, too. And then to end like this."

"Poor deluded fellow. But do you realize, Miss Farquhar, that even with his twisted mind his impulses were all social? Everything he fantasied was done not for private gain or personal vengeance, but always for some dream of bettering the world. Well, enough of that. Let's start the practical procedures going."

Mrs. Elizabeth Grogan had had a wonderful visit with her niece in Roehampton. Sheila had been so hospitable and so generous, paying the round-trip fare and all the extra expenses that were beyond her aunt's small pension. The little poor Mike had left her had been spent long ago.

Now, after the lovely reunion with the few of her family and the friends of her youth still in Roehampton, she was nevertheless looking forward to her quiet little apartment and the happy company of her cats; poor pussies, they must have missed her badly, even though her kind neighbor had kept them fed and cared for.

Her only complaint was that the one bus that connected with Green Meadows left at the absurd hour of 1:00 A.M. Sheila had wanted to stay in the station with her, but Mrs. Grogan had absolutely refused; indeed she had insisted that her niece drive her down no later

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than 11:00 and leave her there to wait alone. Sheila needed her sleep, with Ed away on a business trip and the blessed babies waking early and clamoring for breakfast.

And that nice young man in uniform—some kind of guard, she thought—had been so kind. Even noticing an insignificant old lady like her and making a cup of coffee for her in his own office! She had thanked him warmly and he had patted her shoulder and said, "It will do you good, mother." She wasn't a mother and never had been, but she was touched by the word. Perhaps his mother was dead and that was why he was so thoughtful to a stranger of the same age.

Despite the coffee, as she found a seat in the almost empty bus (how much longer would they keep it running, even at such an hour, unless Green Meadows people used it more?), Mrs. Grogan felt herself becoming sleepy. She got up again and asked the driver to be sure to let her know when they reached her stop. Then she settled down once more, and soon her eyes closed.

The coroner rapped for silence.

"Number 785, Elizabeth Grogan," he read. "Are the witnesses here?"

There were only two witnesses, the dead woman's niece and the driver of the bus in which she had so mysteriously died.

"I am certain my aunt was in perfect health, considering her age, when I left her at the station," the niece declared. "She had a physical examination just before she came to visit me, and they told her they found nothing seriously wrong."

"She seemed okay when she got on," the driver said. "Just afraid of dropping off to sleep and missing her stop."

They had advertised for anyone who had been waiting with Mrs. Grogan in the station, to find out if anything suspicious had occurred there, but no one had responded.

The coroner in the county town near Green Meadows was a soft-hearted man. The niece had seemed fond of her aunt. But this was an inquest, and the facts had to be brought out. He cleared his throat.

"The autopsy showed," he announced reluctantly, "that she had ingested a massive dose of morphine. I'll have to ask you to tell the jury, Mrs. Carroll, if your aunt had ever shown any suicidal tendencies."

"Certainly not," Sheila answered indignantly. "She was a good, religious woman, and in

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our church suicide is a mortal sin."

"No special troubles of any kind that you know of?"

"No, she'd have told me if there were; we were very close. She hadn't much money, but she managed. And her husband has been dead for twenty years, so she wasn't grieving over that."

The coroner's jury brought in a verdict of "murder by person or persons unknown."

The hospital board at its monthly meeting made any deaths in the previous month a part of its regular agenda. In the case of Mr. Gorham, Dr. Liggett and the patient's nurse were questioned. Miss Farquhar was badly worried. If they blamed her she would lose the best position she had ever had, with a black mark on her record.

"How on earth did a patient in a locked private room ever get hold of a kitchen knife?" one board member asked for all of them.

"He wasn't always locked up," Dr. Liggett replied, with a sympathetic glance at the trembling nurse. "Only when he was in one of his intermittent hallucinatory spells. In fact, for most of the time he seemed to be recovering. He had the freedom of the grounds on his better days. He used to wander through all the open buildings and chat with the help; he was quite sociable. I'm afraid the kitchen staff hasn't always been as careful about checking as they ought to be. We've taken steps to correct that.

"I don't think any blame should be attached to Miss Farquhar. I have found her very responsible. She had to leave him alone for a very short period, and she locked the door behind her. We found where he had concealed the knife—for how long nobody knows. It had been hidden under a floorboard which he must have pried up with the knife first, at one of the times when he was not under constant surveillance.

"You must remember that before his mental breakdown Mr. Gorham had been a well-known and very successful inventor. He was used to handling tools and quite capable of a maneuver of this sort."

Miss Farquhar directed a grateful gleam of her beautiful blue eyes at the doctor.

After the board meeting had been adjourned, with no censure to the nurse, Dr. Liggett sat in his office deep in thought, ignoring the paper work piled on his desk. A grotesque idea had occurred to him—an idea stemming from a

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paragraph in the newspaper he had skimmed over when he first returned.

It was the brief account of an inquest in a small county seat in the northeastern corner of the state, on a Mrs. Elizabeth Grogan.

Gorham's persistent hallucination—and a woman who had fallen asleep in a bus in the early hours of the morning and had never awakened.

Could a man, he inquired ridiculously of himself, be two men? Could he be a patient in a private mental hospital and at the same time a security guard in a bus station?

Or could Gorham, in his psychotic dreams, in the three years he had been an inmate here, have telepathed irrational theories and issued posthypnotic commands to a sensitive receiver who would then act out what the demented sender dreamed?

"Oh, bosh!" Dr. Liggett said aloud. He stretched, yawned, and returned to his neglected paper work.

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a *NEW* detective story by

JAMES POWELL

and "different" even for him!

Detective stories have often been called the fairy tales of our times—Grim Fairy Tales, perhaps. But what happens when you take a potpourri of classic old fairy-tale themes and transform them into a genuine-in-the-bottle detective story?

Let's put it another way. What would have been produced if the great fairy-tale tellers of the past had written, each in his own vein, a "straight" detective story? If it had been Frank L. Baum, for instance, with a tale of crime and detection in the Land of Oz? Or the Brothers Grimm? Or Hans Christian Andersen? Would it have been something like the James Powell experiment that follows?

Mr. Powell is "contemplating a series of crime-nursery tales under the general title of 'Godfather Goose Stories'." Will wonders never cease? Not while our hearts are young . . .

THE THEFT OF THE FABULOUS HEN

by JAMES POWELL

The King—some called him Raoul Longfingers—was down on magic. Enchanted beans had cost him dearly. That solitary stalk felled by Jack—some called him the Giant Killer—had fathered a towering bean patch that ripened and burst its pods with magical swiftness. Soon broad leaves were shouldering out the sun, corkscrew tendrils were tapping at cottage windows, and freckled beans the size of auk's eggs were crashing through the thatch roofs.

Terrified, the inhabitants had hurried southward by the

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wagon-load, fleeing sprouts which overnight could spindle a farmhouse whole and lift it high above the clouds. The King's army, mustered for a war against the aging Frog Prince to the West, had to be quick-marched in bright, lead soldier uniforms to battle the encroaching greenery.

Meanwhile by royal decree all magicians and necromancers were herded aboard a ship in the harbor and banished from the kingdom. That, incidentally, was a sea voyage that still makes old sailors moan in their hammocks. In the stern the wizards gathered, short-tempered, bushy-browed old men in conical hats, vying to show that the wind, sea, and sky were theirs to command. At any moment the ship might have spun down into a maelstrom or up into a waterspout, or been becalmed on a glass ocean or battered by mountains of water, while the sky cracked thunder and lightning overhead.

Amidships the witches crowded around their vile cauldrons transforming the terrified captain and his crew into things seagulls like to eat. In the bow the impeccably dressed magicians, whose top hats had set the deck hopping with rabbits and lined the rigging with doves, had now turned to finding, with mock surprise, a treasury of silver dollars behind Jack's ear.

Yes, Jack the Beanstalk Climber was among the banished. As for his fabulous hen that laid golden eggs, King Raoul had confiscated that, placing it high in a glass tower in the back courtyard of his castle. And around the base of the tower he had installed a dragon. And so it was for three years . . .

The news that the enchanted hen had been stolen set the townspeople to whispering, "Somebody's head will roll." The Lord High Detective knew precisely whose. Dressed as always in a belted canvas caftan with shoulder straps and a felt hat with a wide brim, he sat at his desk sucking tragically on the end of a wooden penholder rereading what he had written.

"Dear Randall, my son, now that my Royal Master has chosen to cut short"—he crossed out "cut short" and substituted "terminate"—"terminate our relationship, it pleases me to leave you a legacy far richer than mere earthly goods: the priceless wisdom gleaned from a long and honorable life. Firstly"—he dipped the nib in the ink-well, stared into the fireplace, and sighed. The wisdom still wouldn't come.

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A straw-haired young lad with too much Adam's apple and not quite enough chin stood in the doorway. "My name is Tom," he announced. "The soldier downstairs said this was where the contestants should apply." A royal proclamation had offered half the kingdom and the hand of the Princess Uta to the man who could recover the priceless fowl and bring the thief to justice.

The detective gave a sad smile and offered Tom a seat. "Son," he said in a kindly voice, "I can understand the half-the-kingdom bit, but do you really want Raoul for a father-in-law?" He leaned forward. "Isn't it bad enough just having him for a king?"

Then the detective blanched. A black-hooded, bare-chested man with an immense broad-ax over his shoulder strode into the room. Without a word this new arrival grabbed the detective by the nape and forced him to his knees, kicking a stool in place under his chin.

The detective smiled up at Tom nervously. "It's okay, son. Just a little trial run for tomorrow at dawn. Ketch here's only doing his job. Nothing personal, right, Ketch?" The executioner laughed darkly and hooked a questioning thumb at Tom. The detective nodded.

"Hey, what is this?" protested Tom reedily as Ketch collared him and slammed his chin down on the stool beside the detective's.

"Doesn't anybody ever read the fine print in proclamations?" asked the detective in a tired voice. "There's a standard clause to keep out triflers: if you fail, you get your head cut off."

Tom went wide-eyed and struggled to straighten up. The detective glanced over at a large hourglass on the corner of his desk. "It's now 5:17," he said. "You have until dawn tomorrow. Are you in or out?"

Now Tom's mother (his father, an itinerant woodcutter, had abandoned them when Tom was a baby) had brought him up to believe that diligence and mental alertness were the only true roads to success. To this end, as a hotel management trainee, he had worked ten long hard years in the scullery of The Ball and Socket, the inn near the Forest Gate, content with the pot scrapings, a place to sleep in the ashes, and frequent assurances that he was learning the business.

Then came a fateful afternoon. He had been at the public library catching up on hotel-industry trade journals. As he crossed Rutabaga Street on his way home, a passing coach with

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the royal crest on the door splashed him with mud from head to foot. Tom opened his mouth. But before he could swear a mighty oath, Princess Uta's beautiful face and smiling, primrose eyes appeared in the coach window.

The coach had rumbled on, leaving Tom standing thunderstruck in the street. His mouth was still ajar when the coach, having circled the block, drove by—the primrose eyes at the window were laughing now—and again splashed him with mud. From that day forward Tom grew heart-sick each time he calculated the years it would take to become a prince among hotel owners and worthy of the Princess Uta's hand.

Suddenly fate had offered him a short cut. Could he refuse it? "I'm in," said Tom bravely.

Ketch measured them with his practiced eye, spread his legs and swung the ax, stopping just short of their necks. "Bingo," he muttered under his breath.

The scene of the crime proved to be a disappointment. Tom had expected a structure of bottle green or of crystal clarity. But the Tower of Glass was more like the sooted chimney of a carelessly blown-out kerosene lamp. "The dragon is aptly named Smudge," said the Lord High Detective. With an audible click the huge beast opened one red-raw eye, spread its small batwings, sent a silver ripple of scales around and around the tower, and ended with a thump of its barbed tail.

"Hey, how come the dragon's still on guard?" asked Tom.

"Dragons are hell to retrain," said the dragonkeeper, a bald man in an asbestos suit. At a signal from the detective he put on a hood with a glass window on it, armed himself with a kitchen chair, and advanced on Smudge, cracking a long whip. "Back! Back!" he commanded.

The dragon roared its refusal, engulfing the man in smoke and flame from which the keeper emerged with a black and stump-legged chair. "Back! Back!" insisted the keeper. Slowly, with much belching and complaining, the beast began to unwind and slither backward. The keeper forced Smudge all the way back into an old dirigible hangar and slammed the door shut.

The detective nodded at two sentry boxes. "There are Ragtag Guards on duty here at all times. Recently the day shift's been a one-legged grenadier with a crutch and an eye patch and a deaf, one-armed artillery corporal with mutton chops."

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The Ragtag Guards were disabled veterans assigned to palace duty.

The detective led Tom to a narrow glass door in the base of the tower. "Every day at noon I tend to the hen personally," he said. "The guards stand at the door and I go in alone." Inside the door was an open sack of chicken feed. "I fill my chicken-feed bucket here."

"I notice you don't keep the door locked," said Tom.

"Glass keys are always breaking off in the keyholes," said the detective. "We figure Smudge on one side of the door and a surprise or two on the other is all we need." He grinned and gestured to Tom to go ahead of him. "Be my guest."

Tom peered suspiciously into the sooty twilight. He took a cautious step, another, then a more confident stride—and collided with a wall of glass. A pencil of blood trickling from one nostril, he glared at the amused detective and felt around tentatively with his palms. In front and to his left was glass. He went right, his arms outstretched like a sleepwalker. Abruptly he was decked by a punch in the jaw.

Bouncing up in a manly, fighting stance, Tom lunged in the general direction of his unseen assailant. But an invisible foot tripped him up. He fell forward into an invisible fist that snapped his head back and sat him down hard.

Chuckling, the detective squatted down beside him. 'Son, this tower is a many-leveled maze of glass. Listen." With a flick of his fingernail he made the wall ring like a crystal bell. In the sound Tom could hear the maze, its narrow corridors and their turnings, the dead ends, the stairways that spiraled up and spiraled down, the tunnels, the stiles, the bridges of glass that led to invisible crossroads, the glass half doors with glass doorknobs, and, beyond them, more dead ends.

"Our maze builder was also a student of the human mind," the detective continued. "He studded the maze with strategic fists and feet of glass. Panic and you get a fist in the eye. Get cocky and a foot is there to trip you up. An intruder doesn't just get lost here, he gets the hell beaten out of him."

The detective helped Tom up. "Only the King and I know the safe way through," he said. "So put your hands on my hips and follow me close. Here we go: one, two, three steps, bob and turn left, now four steps up, one, two, duck, three, four, turn left once and left again, open door and down three

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steps, one, two, three . . ."

So they moved through the maze in a snake dance for two. And if Tom's attention wandered and he missed the detective's "Low bridge" or "Right again," he'd club his forehead on an archway or slam into a waiting fist. The roundabout trip to the top took sixteen minutes.

The upper room was bare except for a nest of straw on the glass floor. Through the conical glass roof and glass rafters Tom could see clouds passing overhead.

"Today, like always, I gave the bird its dinner," said the detective, going through the motions of scattering feed. "Then I gathered up the eggs in the chicken-feed bucket and took them to the Royal vault where they are graded."

"What's this?" asked Tom, when the square window high in the sooty wall turned out to be a clean patch of glass.

"The window washer made his weekly visit at two," said the detective.

"Ah ha!" said Tom.

The detective shrugged. "After the keeper drives off Smudge, one of the guards stands in the doorway downstairs and the other goes right up the ladder with the window washer. In fact, it was the window washer who sounded the alarm. After he had squeegeed that first patch there, he looked in and saw the bird was gone. I was on the scene in two minutes flat and searched everybody."

"How long between the time the dragon was driven off and the time the theft was discovered?" asked Tom.

"Five to ten minutes," said the detective. "Even I can't get up here and down again that fast. And I know the way."

The Lord High Detective sat at his desk working on his legacy of wisdom. He wrote: "Firstly, Randall, my son, to thine own self be true." Then he sighed and scratched it out.

Tom paced, wearing the makings of a fine black eye picked up on his way out of the maze. "I bet magic was involved somewhere along the line," he said scornfully. Tom had contempt for people who used magic and other get-rich-quick schemes in place of old-fashioned hard work.

The detective opened a filing cabinet and started throwing things onto the desk. "We rounded up every magic device in town. One wishing belt—the three-wish model; one change purse that always has a coin in it; one pair of seven-league boots; a flying carpet—one of those little foreign jobs; one cloak of invisibility; and over

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there"—he pointed at a large musical instrument in the corner—"one singing harp."

Tom fingered the wishing belt. But the detective shook his head. "All three wishes have been used. We have reliable witnesses."

Tom picked up the purse. "I guess the owner of something like this would never have to steal," he said. The two little ball-snaps proved quite stiff. When Tom had finally pried them apart, he pulled out a copper half-groat piece. Muttering, he poked inside again.

"You have to close the purse and open it each time," said the detective. When the purse proved even harder to close, Tom tossed it aside and moved on to the seven-league boots.

"The guy who owns them wears a winged tin helmet and calls himself the Blue Streak Messenger Service," explained the detective. "Flowers, candy, and singing birthday greetings delivered anywhere in the kingdom. Last month with the highway patrol clocking him at almost the speed of light, he overshot a curve, went through the guard rail, and smack into a tree. They say it rained chocolates and gardenias. He's still in the hospital. The boots he sent out to be resoled." The detective turned them over to show the new, unscuffed leather. "As you can see, they haven't been used since." Tom grunted sulkily.

The detective unfolded the flying carpet. "Agrarian the rug merchant picked this up on a trade-in," he said. "Alakazamkazoo alakazamkazoo alakazamkazoo." As long as he repeated the magic word the carpet flapped sluggishly around the room. The moment he stopped for breath it nose-dived onto the floor.

"Next," said Tom.

"Next comes the cloak of invisibility," said the detective, tapping a bare spot on his desk. "But from noon until three today it was at a cocktail reception at the Osterwaldian Embassy. Its owner thinks it's a great conversation piece."

"You mean there are witnesses who swear they saw its owner there?" demanded Tom.

"Witnesses who swear they didn't," corrected the detective.

Tom paced. "Now let me get this straight: if anyone saw him, then he wasn't wearing the cloak of invisibility. But if nobody saw him, then he was. Right?"

"That and the mysterious print of a human elbow in the clam dip," said the detective. He seemed to be holding something up by his thumbs and forefinger. "Here, try it on." Tom disappeared in

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pieces: first, hands; then arms, shoulders, body, legs. Then his disconnected hands appeared again. "There are mittens," said the detective. "The guy was always losing them, so his wife sewed them to the sleeves."

Tom looked down at where his feet had been. "Short cloaks are a bit more the style right now," he said critically.

"It used to be knee length, I understand," said the detective. "Came with a pair of eight-buckle galoshes of invisibility. But he was forever walking off without them. Finally he lost them all together. So his wife just let out the hem."

Tom stroked his cheek craftily with an invisible hand. "So there's a pair of eight-buckle galoshes of invisibility at large out there," he observed.

"For what it's worth," shrugged the detective. "By the way, you look like a severed head. There's a hood, you know."

Tom vanished completely. After a muffled mutter or two his head reappeared. "But with the hood on you can't see," he complained.

"That's magic for you," said the detective. "Nobody can see you and you can't see anybody. Try smelling your elbow."

"Clam dip," admitted Tom. "Would that hold up in a court of law?" When the detective nodded, Tom stripped off the cloak of invisibility.

"Last but not least is one coin-operated singing harp," said the detective. "With Jack the Giant Killer in exile, it's been his mother's sole support. Lullaby Lil they call her. She pushes it through the streets in a wheelbarrow at dusk shouting 'Sleep! Sleep!' A coin in the slot and your chronic insomniac goes by-by"—he snapped his fingers—"like that."

Tom studied the harp. "Suppose our thief put Smudge to sleep and then—"

"Magic doesn't work on dragons," said the detective. "And don't forget one of the soldiers was deaf."

Tom paced. The detective sat, staring hopelessly at the hourglass. "Randall, my son," he said, thinking out loud, "who has the secret of a happy life, the pessimist who watches the top of the hourglass emptying or the optimist who watches the bottom filling up?"

Out of nowhere Tom said, "My cousin Hansel's dad was always trying to lose him in the woods. But Hansel used to leave a trail of bread crumbs to find his way back."

"So?" said the detective.

Tom had stopped in front of the harp. "So if I was inside the maze, that would be a dandy way to get back out," he said

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and, without thinking, he dropped the half-groat piece into the slot.

"Don't!" shouted the detective as the coin clanged.

"'Rockaby, baby, on the tree top,'" crooned the harp in a tinny tenor. "'When the wind blows, the cradle will rock . . .'"

The cry of the grinding wheel made Tom snap bolt upright and dash to the window. He stood there trying to cram eight horrified fingers and two terrified thumbs into his mouth. On a platform in the front courtyard Ketch was sharpening his ax by the first light of dawn.

"Morning, son," said the Lord High Detective who had stirred up the fire and set the kettle to boil. "Nothing like a good cup of tea to start the day. And I just happen to make the best tea in the kingdom." He whistled dryly and watched the fire.

Tom alternately hugged his churning stomach and pounded his head for an idea. "The wishing belt!" he shouted desperately. "Listen, the guy makes wish number three in secret, wishing for three more wishes. So what the witnesses saw was actually wish number four. Then he wishes himself to the top of the tower with number five and down again with six."

The detective rinsed out the teapot with hot water. "One good tea-making trick is to warm the pot so the boiling water won't startle it," he said. Then he smiled. "Son, sooner or later everybody comes up with that three-more-wishes-on-the-last-wish bit. That's why the magic-belt people have installed 'over-wish' devices on all their models. Wish for three more wishes and the belt self-destructs."

The detective took a tea cannister from the mantel. "My own blend of Formosa and Ceylon, mixed gently so as not to bruise the leaves. A heaping teaspoon for you, one for me, and one for the pot. The next trick: bring the pot to the kettle and not vice versa." He added the hot water and then banged the kettle down.

"But that's it!" he shouted. "Randall, my son, I am pleased to leave you a legacy more precious than rubies. What, Randall, is more refreshing than a good hot cup of tea? And surely the owner of a chain of shops purveying such a brew would earn not only wealth but the gratitude of his fellow man. Et cetera. Et cetera."

Judging the tea steeped enough, the detective poured Tom a cup. "Just wrap your

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lips around that," he said and hurried over to the desk to transcribe his thoughts.

The tea was very strong and very bitter. "Great, really great," lied Tom, secretly spooning in the sugar. The dissolving sugar made him think of the white sand disappearing grain by grain in the hourglass and of his cousin Hansel. Why Hansel again?

Suddenly Tom jumped up and ran over to the hourglass. Then while the detective watched, fascinated, Tom pounded his forehead, ticked things off on his fingers, shook his head, shaded his eyes, muttered, nodded, smiled broadly, then said, "What do you want to know first?"

"How the thief got the bird out of the maze."

"That was the easy part," said Tom. "Nothing magic about that. Remember my cousin Hansel? Well, there was a trail of grain."

"So?" said the detective.

"So the bird followed the trail and ate the grain!" said Tom triumphantly.

The detective shrugged and turned back to his writing.

"Check your chicken-feed bucket," insisted Tom. "You'll find a hole in the bottom that left a trail of grain in the maze. The bird simply followed it back down to the door. When the window washer came, the thief opened the door and there was the hen stuffing itself at the sack of chicken feed."

"But how could the thief get by the soldier who was guarding the door?"

"He couldn't," said Tom. "So the soldier guarding the door has to be the thief. The one-legged grenadier, right?"

The detective nodded. "But how did you know?"

Tom tapped his temple. "A man missing a leg would hardly be the one to go up the ladder with the window washer."

"But son, he had no time to hide the bird."

"The hen is hidden somewhere on this line," said Tom. On a wall map he drew a circle with a three-and-a-half-league radius around the city. "One step there and one step back."

"Hold it," said the detective. "I saw that one-legged soldier walk. If he'd been wearing a seven-league boot he'd have plastered himself all over the courtyard wall."

"Not while he was walking with a crutch," said Tom. "You see, the boot was on his missing leg under one of those lost galoshes of invisibility. Which also explains the unscuffed sole."

After the wedding ceremony came the execution of Jack the

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Giant Killer, for that's who the thieving grenadier turned out to be. The courtyard was crowded. The King scowled from his throne, the fabulous hen preening itself on his gauntleted wrist. Tom and his bride sat next to the King on a loveseat draped with cloth-of-gold. Tom's happiness—Uta's shy, primrose glances made his heart beat a hectic tattoo against the shirt-front of his rented tuxedo —was tempered by the sad spectacle of Jack mounting the scaffold. But wasn't that what comes of trusting to magic instead of good old sweat-of-the-brow and elbow grease?

A hush fell over the crowd as Ketch set Jack's chin on the block and raised his mighty ax. But all at once a coin clanged loudly. There, standing between the shafts of a wheelbarrow on the edge of the crowd, was a little old lady holding a megaphone up to a harp. " 'Rockaby, baby, on the tree top,' " crooned the harp. " 'When the wind blows, the cradle will rock . . .' "

When everyone awoke, nothing remained of Jack and his mother but four wax earplugs. The enchanted hen had also disappeared. Furious, the King had the Lord High Detective beheaded on the spot.

Shaken, but unwilling to let anything spoil his wedding night, Tom set out with Uta for the castle. There, inside the castle gate, was the Tower of Glass. Curtained with lace and outfitted with a circular, silk-canopied bed, the room beneath the glass rafters had been turned into a boudoir fit for a princess, a wedding present from a loving father.

Perhaps Tom hoped for a trail of rose petals to lead him through the moonlit maze on that first night. But all he found were Uta's primrose eyes watching over the edge of the bed high above him. At first he felt his way carefully, trying to recall the cadence: one, two, three, turn left, duck, turn left again . . . But her alluring laughter hurried him until he fell over one side of a stile and down the other, tripped over a glass foot, and butted his head against a dead end.

Then, for the first of many times, he lost his temper and rushed full angry tilt into a flurry of glass fists. He fell to the floor, but Uta's crooning "Tom-my, Tom-my, Tom-my" soon brought him tottering back into the fray. At dawn, battered and bruised, Tom picked himself up from the floor for a final time and followed the petals of his own dried blood back out through the maze.

Several years later as King

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Raoul and Ketch sat in a darkened castle window with a bottle of the old Falerian between them, watching Tom's nightly struggle in the maze, the King burst a blood vessel howling in fatal mirth. At Tom and Uta's coronation everyone agreed that she was more beautiful than ever. But was that really him, some wondered, that shuffling, broken-faced man with the scar-tissue eyes and the fat ear?

King's crown notwithstanding, Tom still spent his nights in the trackless maze and his days mending and dozing, his throne pulled up to the fire. The business of government fell to Ketch who, as it turned out, was Tom's long-lost father. As Ketch the Protector he ruled with an iron hand until one day, while giving his ax a rubdown with Romona's Patented Rust Remover, he fumbled, cut off his knee, and died. Sometime later Tom succumbed to a disease until then found only among boxing kangaroos. Uta fretted, and not long after she pined away.

The crown passed to Raoul's nephew, Clement I, called Clement Lackluster. They tell no stories of him or his startlingly four-square line. But to this day the people of the kingdom speak with simple affection of Uta, the Virgin Queen, and her consort, Tom, the King with the Cauliflower Ear.

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This is the 393rd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a haunting story, with a fine sense of timing . . .

The author, Mollie Pearce McKibbon, was 25 when she submitted "Beyond the Last House." She wrote us that "ever since learning to hold a pencil, blank white paper has fascinated" her; "one line written on it transforms it." She and her husband are "saving for a home; our various hobbies are beginning to crowd us out of our apartment." Mrs. McKibbon writes, paints, sews, reads, and loves to listen to stereo. The happily married pair also "share a love for canoeing and fishing."

Mrs. McKibbon says "there are many more stories cooking away" in her head. We look forward to the next dish she is ready to serve . . . .

BEYOND THE LAST HOUSE

by MOLLIE PEARCE McKIBBON

If only I could sleep. This coffee certainly didn't help but then neither did my new Agatha Christie book nor the third rerun on TV of *Arsenic and Old Lace*. I have tried the other channels with the same results. On each one either Queen Elizabeth or President Nixon has waved goodbye and disappeared abruptly into that small white dot. Now even the dot has vanished, pulling with it the familiar outlines of my living room. Only the cheshire leer of my luminous clock remains, suspended somewhere above the cold fireplace. It is three o'clock.

The outside world is almost as invisible to me now as the inside one. There is fog to disguise everything.

I pull Joe's bathrobe, dear old thing, closer to me as if it were Joe himself and peer out

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my front window. Any minute now his headlights will be visible and I'll hear that short impatient toot. I tell myself that, but I really know better. Of course it won't happen. Joe is dead.

A lump rises in my throat but no, I will not give in. Instead, I keep my eyes fixed on the distant end of the street and avoid looking toward Joe's favorite easy chair. From the direction of the highway I can hear the hum of an approaching car. I shall concentrate on that.

A dark shape advances slowly and I wonder who frequents dead-end streets at this early-morning hour. This unlighted portion of the street is a local haunt for eager lovers.

I'm glad the last streetlight is not directly in front of the house. My curiosity thus has the anonymity of darkness. The dark shape, moving cautiously without lights, has now taken on a definite contour. It is a four-door sedan, I think.

Why am I standing here and staring out at a strange car?

The car has paused just beyond the house but I can see no movement. It is difficult to see through the fog, but a form is emerging—yes, I can just make out a man who is coatless and has his shirt sleeves rolled up. He closes the front car door very carefully and moves toward the back of the car. He now has a flashlight in his hand.

We live in the last house on this street—at least, I do now. Joe always liked this location. The lot has a large treed backyard and there is a grove of tall poplars between the barrier at the end of the street and the children's playground. Plenty of privacy, Joe used to say, no noisy motorbikes or fast cars. But I have always felt uneasy living here in this last house.

The man is acting very oddly, considering that he is alone on the sleeping street. Then so am I alone. Joe and I are usually in bed by ten thirty. I turn to look at the clock. It is 3:15.

By this time the man has unlocked and lifted the door of the trunk compartment. Straining through the fog, I can discern only that he is tugging on something heavy inside the car. It looks at this moment to my startled eyes very much like a body.

I shiver as the hair on my neck begins to prickle. I can hear my heart pounding as I shrink behind the curtains. The man is looking toward this house. I inhale until it pains; but apparently reassured somehow, the man and his burden melt gradually into the fog.

I am stunned. The import of this occurrence is overwhelm-

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ing, but I must think. The trunk compartment is still open. Will I have time?

I hear the sound of dirt on a shovel coming from the playground. The job is very quietly and carefully done—I can tell because there are long pauses between shovelsful.

I have formulated a plan but I must waste no time carrying it out. The idea is preposterous, impossible, but even as I'm saying this I am working at it. The effort to get to the front steps is tremendous, but I am desperate and amazingly strong for my small frame.

It is not so easy from the front lawn to the car. The lawn is wet and I keep slipping. Finally, with a last great effort, I manage it and close the trunk compartment noiselessly.

There are only seconds to spare before I hear the man's returning steps. I am back inside at the window trying to regain my breath when, lurching out of the disintegrating grayness, the man appears, now minus his burden. He is unsteady and unsure. He goes to the trunk compartment to replace his shovel and pauses to stare at the closed door.

I hold my breath, shuddering, but suddenly he bends over, his back to me. I can't see his face, yet I know the man is throwing up. Disgusting! I'm about to turn away but now he has straightened up and looks in this direction. I freeze, one hand clutching the curtain. His flashlight has spotlighted me, barefoot in Joe's soiled robe, standing between the drapes. I can't see his features though I know his eyes have me in focus and I feel naked in panic.

The phone, if I can just reach the phone! It's an arm's length away. I can just manage.

Oh, my God, darkness. He's turned off the flashlight! Momentarily blinded, I can see nothing, not even the clock. My hand is on the receiver now, but whom do I call? I am dialing without a number in mind. Any number. Then I replace the phone receiver. It's no use. I don't really want anyone.

Somehow, unbelievably, my decision is not necessary. The man throws the shovel onto the back seat of the car and speeds away. Thank God for Joe's chair. My legs are shaking so badly I must sit down.

Think, woman! He will be back. You are safe now—but for how long?

Sergeant Clark was incredulous. He and Officer Ramey exchanged looks over the top of the car. In the back of their squad car sat a hysterical man.

"All I did was hit my dog. It was late and I backed into the

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driveway in the fog. I didn't hear him bark until. . .Oh, my God, the kids will never understand."

He was almost incoherent, trying to explain to both policemen what he obviously couldn't comprehend himself.

"All right, sir, so where did you bury the dog?"

"At the end of a one-way street, in among some trees. I mean, what could I say? George was their dog and the kids. . . Anyway, when I got home I remembered I hadn't put the shovel in the trunk compartment. So I did and there was that body. I don't even know who he is!"

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 394th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a sensitive and compassionate character study . . .

The author, John Rudin, was 45 when he submitted his first attempt at fiction. He is married and has four children. He was born in Vermont, but his "growing-up was mostly in Texas." Like so many who finally turn to writing, his work background is multifaceted: electronics in the Navy, physics and math in college, work with x-ray equipment, work in the construction field, photography, and audio engineering for motion pictures. Mr. Rudin's friends think he is "over-hobbied, with such things as fishing, hunting, camping, handcrafts, nature study, and Boy Scout leadership." But can anyone be "over-hobbied" who still finds time to write? . . .

SELLIN' SOME WOOD

by JOHN RUDIN

"Mornin', Edward."

"Hello, Mr. Bill."

"Selling some wood this mornin'?"

"Sellin' some wood, Mr. Bill."

"Hello, Edward."

"Hello, Mr. Tucker, sellin' some wood this mornin'."

The two men watched as the homemade cart rattled by, piled high with fireplace logs and pulled by the big boy. The foolish grin and empty stare didn't change as Edward's head turned back from the two men to the direction in which he was heading. A mongrel dog, with just a trace of a limp, trotted at his side.

"Shame," said one of the men as he turned and entered the store.

"Yeah," said the other, following.

Down the street, along the two-block business section of the town, similar greetings

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passed between the townspeople and the big slow-witted boy. He proudly explained to each that he was "sellin' some wood this mornin'." They usually smiled and acknowledged that was good and they were glad for him. But after he had passed, their smiles usually changed to looks of pity before they went about their business.

Edward never saw the pity. He wouldn't have understood if he had seen it. He could understand some things though —like pride. He was proud of his pull-cart, which he had made all by himself. Well, almost by himself. Mr. Sam at the gas station helped him some with the hard things like figuring out where the axles go and how to fasten them on. But Edward had done a lot—like hammering in the nails where Mr. Sam showed him, and bending the cotter pin in the hole at the end of the axle to hold the wheels on.

It was all pretty hard, and he had painted the whole thing without any help at all except just a little bit. Everybody told him it was a nice cart and that made him feel good. He knew it was a nice cart, but it was extra good if other people noticed, too. He thought about things like that while he was delivering and stacking the wood.

Edward felt very fortunate. He loved the feel of the ax and the saw in his hands. He was careful, too. Every piece of wood was cut to exactly the same length. He had a special stick that he used to measure every piece before he cut it.

One time he lost his measuring stick and had to make a new one. He went to a house where he had delivered wood before and made the new measuring stick just as long as the wood there. He was glad he had figured out to do that. If the logs were too thick to burn well he split them into thinner pieces, which also made it easier to stack when he delivered the wood.

That was one of the things he did best of all—stacking the wood. He took special care that everything was just right. No piece could stick out any farther than the others. And the stacks had to be perfectly straight. He always walked around and looked at the stack from all sides to make sure it was perfect before he knocked on the door for his money.

This morning, after he checked the stack, he knocked for Mrs. Sinclair. She came out, examined the stack as she knew she was expected to do, paid him, and said, "That's fine, Edward, and this morning I have a bone for your dog."

"Yes'm," said Edward, "he

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likes 'em." He accepted the package from her, grinned, and backed away to his cart.

As he reached for the pull-rope he stopped and inspected one wheel partly submerged in a puddle. He frowned. "Mud," he said, and for the first time that day he looked unhappy.

"We have to go to Mr. Sam's," he explained to the mongrel, and promptly forgot the wrapped bone in his hand. Edward headed down the driveway, pulling his cart, and turned up the street with purpose. The dog, bone-scent fresh in his nostrils and tail a-twitter, kept pace.

At the service station Sam heard the rattle of the cart and turned, recognition already on his face. "Hello, Edward, sell some wood this mornin'?"

Edward ignored the question and pointed to the left front wheel of his cart.

"Jammed with mud," he said.

Sam looked closer. "Edward, I don't think there's any mud in the bearing. Just on the wheel."

"Won't work if it's jammed with mud. Can I clean it, Mr. Sam?"

"But I don't think—" Sam stopped, eyeing the boy closely. "Sure, Edward, go ahead."

Sam watched Edward pull the cart over to the side of the station. He remembered all the trouble he'd had helping the boy build the cart, the difficulty he'd had trying to explain to him how to take care of it. Edward had not had the cart long when he had come by the station one day, trying to pull the cart against an impossible cake of dried mud on each wheel. Sam had stopped him and patiently explained that the wheel bearings could not be allowed to get fouled.

He had then carefully showed Edward how to remove the hubs, pull the cotter pins, and wash out and relubricate the bearings. It was a long and difficult job, but Edward eventually learned, and since then he stopped often, much more often than necessary, to remove and clean the wheels.

"Won't work if it's jammed with mud," Edward invariably said, and he had said it again today.

He started to turn the cart on its side when it dawned on him that he was being encumbered by the wrapped bone still in his hand. His mouth split in a sheepish grin. He tore off the wrapper and handed the bone to the dog. The mongrel took it and padded off to worry the bone on the grass at the edge of the driveway. Edward settled to his task.

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The last wheel was cleaned and oiled and Edward was struggling with the final cotter pin when a mud-spattered pickup truck wheeled sharply in under the canopy. The front fender narrowly missed Edward's upturned cart and the groaning of the brakes testified to the driver's irritation. Ed Barr leaped out of the truck.

"Damn it, Sam," Barr growled, "why do you let that moron clutter up this place?"

"Hell, he's not hurtin' anything, Ed."

"Well, the damn fool oughta be locked up."

"He's all right, I tell you. He don't mean any harm." Sam started gassing the truck and Barr strode toward Edward. He stopped six feet away as if to avoid anything resembling social contact.

"Hey, boy, why don't you keep that damn wagon outta the way?"

Edward simply stood and stared, slack-jawed, uncomprehending. He wondered why Mr. Barr always called him "boy" instead of Edward and why the man always acted this way toward him. He didn't even realize they had the same first name, and would never have understood what effect that unhappy coincidence could have on a man like Ed Barr.

"I'm fixin' the wheels, Mr. Barr. Won't work if they're jammed with mud."

"You and your damn wheels. You deliver my wood this mornin', boy?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Barr. Early this mornin', Mr. Barr."

"You put it in the shed this time, like I said, boy?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Barr. Like you said, right in the shed by the back door."

"Well, it better be."

Edward just nodded his head vigorously, up and down. He had remembered all right. He'd done it, but he hadn't liked it. Not only had there been a muddy spot by the shed door, but when he was carrying in the wood he'd seen the shotgun. Right up there on the wall. Mr. Barr's shotgun.

When Edward had first seen it he stopped and gawked, recognizing it as the thing that had hurt his dog. It was all he could do to tear his eyes away each time he walked in with another armful of wood. He'd tried to keep his back to it while he was stacking the wood, so he wouldn't have to look at it. He was glad when he was done and could leave.

Barr swore, spit on the pavement, and turned toward the rest rooms. He didn't see Edward's dog lying in the grass by the drive or he wouldn't have walked up on him so fast.

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The dog was startled as Barr's foot slapped the concrete next to him and instinctively turned and snapped at the offending foot, at the same time giving a warning bark.

The movement and noise would have given anyone a start, but Barr let out a frightened shout and jumped back, cracking his elbow against the brick of the station wall. He realized immediately what had happened and stepped forward, lashing out viciously with his foot at the dog. The dog's reflexes were excellent and he avoided the kick, but Barr's momentum carried him onto the grass.

He fell, sprawling on the spot the dog had just left. The man was livid. He cursed and swore and, as he got up, hurled obscenities at Edward, the dog, Sam, the station—everything in sight.

Sam suppressed an urge to laugh. As he approached Barr, he pretended real concern.

"You okay, Ed?"

Barr was brushing himself off and cradling his bruised elbow. "Yes, no thanks to that imbecile and his damned mutt."

"Just an accident. Could have happened to anybody," said Sam, and they went into the station together.

Edward didn't really understand what had happened except that Mr. Barr had fallen. He hadn't seen the whole thing because he had been busy trying to right his cart. He was glad Mr. Barr wasn't hurt even if he did act awful mad, and he had long since stopped wondering why Mr. Barr didn't like his dog. He didn't and that was that.

His job finished, Edward called to the dog and started off down the street, pulling the cart behind him. He was pleased with the way it rolled on its freshly oiled bearings. The immediate past incident was already forgotten. When Barr's truck pulled up beside him, it was as if nothing had happened so far as Edward was concerned.

"Hello, Mr. Barr."

"Come here, boy."

The truck had stopped and Edward dropped his pull-rope. He walked over to the open window on the passenger's side.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Barr."

"I want you to bring me some wood, boy."

"I brought it this mornin', Mr. Barr, early. I stacked it in the shed just like you told me. And I was very careful to—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, but I want some more."

"Some more, Mr. Barr?"

"Oh, for God's sake, boy, I want you to bring some more wood!"

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"Yes, sir, Mr. Barr." He finally understood. "I'll bring some more wood in the mornin'. I'll cut it this afternoon, Mr. Barr, and I'll bring it in the mornin'."

Barr was frowning. "I want it this afternoon."

Edward was puzzled again. "I got to cut it this afternoon, Mr. Barr."

"Can't you bring it when you're through cutting?"

Edward thought a few moments. "At sundown? You want me to bring it at sundown, Mr. Barr?"

"Yes, boy, at sundown. Bring it at sundown and be sure you don't forget."

The pickup lurched ahead and sped off down the street. Edward stood a while and watched until it disappeared around the curve, heading out of town toward Barr's place. He still wasn't sure why, but he knew Mr. Barr wanted more wood and he was going to be sure he got it there by sundown. Anyone besides Edward who had seen the hatred and anger on Barr's face as he drove away would have advised Edward to stay away from Barr, especially that day.

The little patch of woods that was Edward's source of supply was on the edge of town and not far from where Barr lived. Edward worked hard that afternoon, as he always did, and by the time the sun was very low, the cart was loaded, and they were on their way.

They were little more than specks when Barr saw them on the road heading his way. As he watched, his anticipation grew and he shifted uneasily on the rock he was sitting on in the tall grass. He had been leaning back against the fence post, but now he shifted forward, sitting up a little straighter to see better through the grass and bushes in which he was hidden. The shotgun was heavy across his knees.

As Barr watched, the dog would run ahead of the boy and the cart, searching the grass on either side of the road looking for whatever dogs hope to find. Barr wasn't sure, but once or twice he thought he heard a childish laugh as the dog returned now and again to his master, and each time Barr gripped the gun tighter and swore to himself.

They were closer now and Barr tingled as they veered off the road onto the long curving path that led up along the small front pasture to the house. Barr had warned the boy once before to keep his mutt out of the fenced area. But dogs pay little attention to barbed wire, and he had fired at him with the shotgun. It was at long

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range and he had only nicked one of the mutt's legs.

This time would be different, and it would help make up for the rankling embarrassment this idiot and his dog had caused him this morning. Barr thought about the incident in the gas station and even more bitterness churned inside him.

Now he could hear the rattle of the cart and through the grass he saw the dog's shadow prancing into the field. It was time, and Barr rose with the sweetness of revenge replacing the bitterness in his throat.

As he stood, the shotgun came to his shoulder and he shouted, "I warned you about that mutt, boy."

"Can't shoot my dog, Mr. Barr," yelled Edward.

Barr's finger tightened on the trigger.

"CAN'T SHOOT HIM!"

In absolute glee Barr pulled the trigger. With a grinding, shattering roar the world came apart in his face.

The searing flash was the last thing Barr saw. The last thing he smelled was a mixture of burnt powder and burnt flesh. And as he toppled backward, the last thing he heard was, "... jammed it full of mud, Mr. Barr."

"Q"

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16 NEW stories — including

STANLEY ELLIN *(about a new kind of kidnaping)*

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EDWARD D. HOCH *(about Ulysses S. Byrd)*

BILL PRONZINI *(about a "locked room")*

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another GIDEON "Inspiration" by

J. J. MARRIC (John Creasey)

New Scotland Yard was the pulse of London's crime, and Gideon, Commander of the C.I.D., was the doctor's finger on the pulse . . .

GIDEON AND THE FLU EPIDEMIC

by J. J. MARRIC (John Creasey)

A peculiar kind of influenza epidemic raged throughout London. Not Asian flu, and not at all deadly. Not gastric flu, nothing so uncomfortable. There were various names for it.

"Knockout flu," headlined *The Globe.*

"48-hour flu," headlined *The Record.*

"A flicking awful flu," complained Superintendent Lemaitre when he entered the office of George Gideon, Commander of the Criminal Investigation Department at New Scotland Yard. Always thin, he now looked positively gaunt, and against him Gideon looked almost too massive and fit. "Knocked me right out. Left here on Friday night, fit as a fiddle. Got up Saturday morning on top of the world. Had me breakfast—and went out like a light. *Non compos mentis* all day."

"Normal," Gideon remarked.

"No, I wasn't normal, I tell you. I—" Lemaitre, given to bright colors and smooth hair, suddenly realized what Gideon had meant. "Hope *you* get it," Lemaitre finished darkly. "That'll show you whether it's funny or not."

Gideon grinned.

"Malcolm and Pru are down with it," Lemaitre said, of two of his children. "They say the schools are half empty."

"Hmm," Gideon mused, and stared at Lemaitre.

The Superintendent had worked with Gideon for many years, and—to use his own words—he "could read him like

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a book." At this moment the page in the book was saying that Gideon had become preoccupied with a case, or some aspect of crime, and that he, Lemaitre, would be wise to keep quiet. So the Superintendent sat at his desk and picked up some reports.

"Lem," Gideon said, seemingly out of the blue, "how many of our chaps are down with this flu?"

"I dunno."

Gideon glared, without speaking. After a few seconds Lemaitre pushed his chair back.

"Okay, I'll go and find out," he said, and disappeared.

On Gideon's desk were reports of the weekend's crimes, of arrests which were police triumphs and getaways which were police failures. The Yard was the pulse of London's crime, and Gideon was the doctor's finger on the pulse. He looked through some statements about crimes being investigated, then read the usual Monday morning summary, which was prepared with great precision.

"One hundred and forty-three burglaries and forced entries," he read aloud. "Ninety-seven private houses, thirty-four apartments, all the others shops and warehouses."

The 97 and the 34 meant that 131 people—men, women, or children—had been scared out of their wits that weekend.

Gideon disliked crime; but even more he disliked it when ordinary people suffered in their homes. He put out a hand and lifted a telephone.

"Get me Mr. Robson, of N.I. Division."

"Yes, sir."

Robson had a Division which covered a great deal of St. John's Wood residential area.

"Hallo, George! You on your feet?" Robson was the bluff type.

"Just about, Robby. Like to do a nice door-to-door questioning job?"

"No, I wouldn't!" replied Robson, on the instant. "I'm at two-thirds of establishment now. My chaps are going down like nine-pins."

"You had seventeen burglaries on Saturday night," Gideon said.

"Are you telling me or asking me?"

"I'm asking you to find out how many of them were from houses where this flu has struck," Gideon said.

"Eh?"

"Didn't you hear me?"

Robson said slowly, "It's just sinking in. I'll ring you back."

As Gideon hung up the receiver the door burst open and Lemaitre came rushing in,

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obviously hot-foot with news.

"George, we're damn near decimated! One in four are away this morning. I haven't known anything like it since 1948. Then—"

"Listen," interrupted Gideon, "I want to know how many flu-struck families had visitors over the weekend. I've asked Robson. Get three or four of our men on the job and—"

"*Visitors?*"

The sad truth was, Lemaitre would never learn to think before he spoke. Gideon looked at him stonily.

"Oh, *burglars!*" Lemaitre breathed, and his eyes lit up. "George," he went on, "you're the crusher—you really are."

Gideon smiled, amused, as the door closed again on his colleague. He studied all the reports on his desk, on crimes ranging from assault to robbery, from murder to blackmail, but all the time his mind was analyzing the flu and the staff situation. If one man in every four who should be on the beat was off duty, then the police were spread very thin on the ground.

One of his three telephones rang.

"Gideon here."

"George," Lemaitre said, "there were a hell of a lot of burglaries and break-ins at places where the occupants were down with the flu. Some of them didn't even see the beggars who sneaked in the bedroom in broad daylight. One chap says his wallet was lifted from under his pillow."

"I've been thinking," Gideon said.

"Go *on*," scoffed Lemaitre.

"If there's a big proportion of thefts from houses where the occupants are down with the flu, the thieves must know in advance who's ill."

"That's all very well, but how could they tell?"

"See a doctor."

It took an appreciable time for that to sink in, but at last Lemaitre cried, "You mean, *follow* the doctors."

"That's it," Gideon said.

"Then we ought to do the same! But, George, we can't spare the men. We can't keep things ticking over properly as it is. What the heck are we to do?"

"Here's the drill," Gideon said. "Send a teletype message to all Divisional stations. Ask them to find out from the local doctors where patients have this flu. And then have all the likely houses watched. Got all that?"

"I'll get that message off," Lemaitre promised.

As Gideon hung up, another call came through, this time Robson—a Robson who sound-

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ed at once chastened and yet eager.

"Over half of our victims were down with the flu, George. I'm going to check with the local medics and—"

Gideon thanked the fates for men of such acumen, and then put the epidemic out of his mind and concentrated on the other cases, almost serenely sure that these were all he had to worry about now.

And it was so.

All over London on that brisk bright day, and that clear cold night, the thieves who had thrived on the city's sickness made visits to the ailing. One after another they came out, pockets and sacks laden, straight into the arms of waiting policemen.

"How the hell did you *know*?" was like a refrain.

At first no one could answer.

Soon, however, the grapevine worked, as it always did. It had worked to tell the little crooks how to find the victims of the flu, so as to go after easy pickings. Now it served to say one thing to those in the police cells and the remand cells and to those who had planned crimes for another night.

The refrain was: "Old Gideon of the C.I.D. caught on to it."

So the respect and the fear which so many criminals felt for Gideon grew. When he went home that Wednesday night he was as fit as a fiddle, but on Thursday morning he was flat on his back, oblivious even of his wife moving about the room.

But London's criminals didn't know.

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a NEW story by

CELIA FREMLIN

The story of a woman shoplifter, of a plump middle-aged woman who has plenty of money—indeed, who has everything she could want in life (everything?)—and still goes shoplifting day after day. But this time she knowingly, deliberately steals a dress four sizes too small and not at all suitable in style . . . This is one of the most unusual shoplifting stories we've ever published, with the "extra" of Celia Fremlin's distinctive "touch" . . .

IF IT'S GOT YOUR NUMBER

by CELIA FREMLIN

Just catching sight of the woman for a second time didn't prove that she was a store detective. Well, of course it didn't. Clutching the shopping bag with a hand already slippery with sweat, Martha forced herself to maintain her strolling, leisurely pace—past the glittering racks of cocktail dresses, past the sumptuous evening skirts of velvet and brocade—slowly, slowly does it.

If she once let herself quicken her steps by no matter how small a fraction, she knew she would be lost. Panic would seize her, she would break into a run, make a dash for the escalator, and by that time the whole shop would be after her, not merely this slim elegant woman in the oatmeal trouser-suit.

"*After her!*" How ridiculous! Martha struggled to control her galloping imagination, to think beyond the wild hammering of guilt in her brain, and to consider, coolly, the factual, common-sense reality of her situation.

No one had seen her take the dress. Indeed, in the raucous, blood-red darkness of Young Ideas, with pop music blaring out and the long-haired boys and girls roaming between the

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clothes like a herd of jungle creatures—in such a setting it would have been hard enough for anyone to notice anything, let alone to bother about such a dull, middle-aged customer as herself.

She had been all alone behind the tight-packed maxi-dresses at the far end of the room, out of sight of everyone, and even with time to make her choice. No one had seen her, either, as she slipped out from behind the rack with her spoils; and now here she was, already half the length of the store away from the scene of her crime, in a different department altogether.

And as for the woman in the oatmeal suit—why, it was coincidence, sheer coincidence, that she should have turned up in this department as well. She wasn't even looking in Martha's direction—hadn't been, either, on that earlier occasion, when they'd passed each other on the way out of Young Ideas.

What would the woman have seen, anyway, even if she *had* looked? Just one more plump, smartly dressed, middle-aged woman strolling through Cocktail and Evening Wear with a shopping bag in her hand. Exactly like all the other middle-aged women who had come shopping this winter Thursday afternoon. All of them smart, all of them with shopping bags in their hands, and all of them—well, an awful lot of them, anyway—with lines of tension round their mouths and a look of furtive anxiety in their eyes, even though they hadn't (well, Martha presumed they hadn't) stolen anything at all.

So there was nothing to mark her out from the rest of them. Absolutely nothing. Stupid to allow her heart to race like this, her hands to sweat! All she had to do was to keep dawdling along—she was in Day Dresses now—pausing to examine a neckline here, a price tag there, just to keep her nerve, and all would be well.

At last the escalator! As she set foot on the moving track and saw the ground floor gliding up to meet her, Martha felt the kind of thankfulness and gratitude that the pilot of a damaged plane must feel as he catches sight of the perfect spot for an emergency landing. For the crowd down there on the ground floor was so large, and packed so tight in all the aisles, that surely all possibility of detection would soon be over.

Down, down she sailed, diving toward that milling anonymous sea of humanity like a fish escaping back into its native element.

Safe! Safe! In her relief

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Martha almost skipped off the end of the escalator, and as she began to battle her way through the crowd toward the main entrance, she was aware of an exultation that went far beyond the satisfaction of having successfully acquired an £8.50 dress without paying for it. It was as if what she had done was some kind of victory of the human spirit, a slap in the face of middle age. It was even an argument, of sorts—a clinching final argument in the dreary long-drawn-out conflict with her husband.

"*See*, Leonard?" her theft seemed to be saying to him, in gleeful triumph. "*See? That'll* show you!"—though *what* he was to "see," and how the theft was going to "show" him, she had no idea. Especially since, God willing, Leonard was never going to know anything about it at all.

Already the entrance doors were in sight. Beyond them she could see the glittering dusk of Oxford Street, lit up like fairyland against the coming night. "I've done it, I've done it!" she found herself exulting, in wordless joy, as she pushed and squeezed her way toward the jam-packed entrance. "It's worked, it's succeeded!"—and in that very moment, just as the revolving doors were drawing her in, she became aware of the woman in the oatmeal suit, not a yard away from her.

Martha did not know how far along Oxford Street she had been running before her breath gave out. Not very far, probably, for her muscles and her wind were not what they had once been. Not what they had been before—well, before security and Leonard and a nice home had got their grip on her. Before television and chocolates and over-lavish cocktail parties had become the pattern of her days.

"Everything a woman could want!" Leonard had once launched this hackneyed reproach at her in the course of one of their weary rows, and of course he had been right. She *had* everything—and how, over the years, it had sucked the strength out of her muscles, the zest out of her soul. The strength and the zest which once, long ago . . .

"Excuse me, Madam."

Maybe the words were not addressed to Martha at all. Or maybe, even if they were, it was only some stranger asking the way to Selfridge's. She would never know. For before the sentence could be completed she was off and away, battering once more through the crowds, pushing, dodging, worming her way through the interstices of this human maze until, at last,

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she found herself at the entrance to an Underground station.

Which station it was she did not know and did not care. Headlong she plunged into its seething, anonymous security; and in almost no time at all, it seemed, she was on the train, standing, wedged tight against her fellow passengers, and with the shopping bag still clutched grimly in her left hand.

But the sense of exultation was gone now. The triumph, the exhilaration, the excitement, had all drained out of her, and she felt sanity returning, like a recurrent illness.

Why? *Why* had she done it? She'd had plenty of money in her purse—Leonard had never been mean. It wasn't as if she'd even *wanted* the dress—it was ridiculous, four sizes too small at least, and years and years too young for her, with its frilly, scooped-out neckline and little puff sleeves.

Why had she done such a thing?—risking the career of her hard-working lawyer husband, at the same time possibly bringing total, irremediable humiliation on herself. She could almost see the headlines in the papers: *Wife of Well-Known Barrister in Court for Shoplifting*—and she could almost quote the story which would follow: "victim of a neurotic compulsion . . ." "psychiatric treatment" . . . "not uncommon symptom among women who feel themselves useless and unloved."

Useless and unloved. If any of the neighbors didn't know it already, they would know it now. Or would, if she wasn't very, very careful. Rousing herself, Martha glanced along the car to reassure herself that there was no oatmeal trouser-suit in sight, no official-looking person peering covertly in her direction.

She was surprised, faintly, to notice how much the rush-hour crowd had already thinned out. There were even some seats vacant. Thankfully, still clutching her shopping bag, Martha sank into the nearest empty seat. Only now had she become aware of how tired she was, how much her feet hurt. Indeed, her whole body ached with tiredness after her day's shopping—if "shopping" was the word. She leaned back, gratefully, on the upholstered seat and closed her eyes . . .

Had she dozed off? Martha sat up with a jolt, and with an uneasy feeling that a long, long time had passed. Where had they got to? Had they passed Hammersmith Broadway, where she had to change?

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Peering out through the grimy window, she caught a momentary glimpse of an ill-lit platform, dingy and narrow, and crowded with a confusion of people; but before she had been able to ascertain the name of the station, it was gone, and they were thundering on into the darkness.

They must have passed Hammersmith long ago. That grimy, poorly lit station they had just left was wholly unfamiliar. They must be nearing the end of the line—or an even more disturbing thought—maybe she was traveling in the wrong direction altogether. Maybe, in her state of confusion and panic, she had got onto an East-bound train by mistake.

Yes, that must be it. How infuriating! Now she would have to cross over to the other side of the line and perhaps wait ages for a return train. She would be late getting home, that was certain! Leonard would be home before her; he would be waiting, irritable, wanting to know where she'd been, what had kept her so long.

Clutching her guilty shopping bag, would she be able to answer him brightly, convincingly? Or would she find herself blushing and stammering and watching the weary suspicion growing in his cool appraising eyes?

The train was slowing down now, and gathering her things together Martha prepared to leave. Funny how few people there were on the train now. Just a small group of soldiers, and an old man slumped as if in sleep. The lighting was strange, too, so feeble and dim. Something must have gone wrong, but at this point in her thoughts the train came to a halt and the doors slid open.

"Please, what station is this?" she asked the man who was pushing past her into the train; but to her surprise he merely laughed.

"Not much odds, is it, sweetheart?" he remarked jocosely. "So's you're a hundred feet down, that's all you want to worry about, a night like this! Hell, it's bloody murder up there!"—and he passed, whistling, into the train.

"Well!" Martha stood on the platform, speechless, as the train drew away. The cheek of the fellow! Was he a nut or something? And only now did she turn and really look at her surroundings . . .

It was all exactly as she remembered it. The rolls of bedding, the deck chairs, the snug little family parties, with a blanket outspread to mark their territory on the platform, with

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Mum in the middle dispensing sandwiches and cups of tea, for all the world as if this was a seaside outing. And the old men playing Housey Housey, and the kids larking about, much too near the edge of the platform, the Shelter Wardens shouting at them good-humoredly. And Charlie. Yes, there was Charlie in his usual place at the end of the platform, just tuning up on his accordion.

"You're new here, ain't you, sister?" a kindly, middle-aged man addressed her, and Martha started, as if awakened from sleep. "Me? Oh!" She stopped. "No, I'm old, old!" had been the reply on the tip of her tongue. "I've been here more than thirty years!"—but of course she mustn't disconcert him with such incomprehensible nonsense.

"N-no, I'm not staying, I'm on my way home," she stammered, a strange and incredulous joy growing in her as she spoke. "I have to go—" but as she moved toward the exit, the man laid a friendly, restraining hand on her shoulder.

"I'd stop down here for a bit if I were you, sister," he advised. "Old Jerry ain't half going it tonight! Ain't 'e, Sid?" He appealed for confirmation to an older man, perched on a roll of bedding at their feet and sucking at his pipe.

"'S'right!" agreed this new contributor to the discussion. "'S' a real bad 'un tonight! I said it'd be bad, din' I, when them sirens went early? Not five o'clock, it wasn't—I 'adn' 'ad me tea. I don' like it, I says. When them sirens goes early, it means a rough night, I says. 'E only starts up that early when 'e's got a real packet for us! Like that Wednesday when—"

A clatter of running feet along the platform interrupted him. Two youths, rosy with danger, alight with glory from the terrible Outside, were racing along the platform, drunk with news.

"The Ship's got it!" they yelled, in that strange ecstasy of disaster that Martha remembered so well. "Yeah, the Shipton Arms—a direct hit. You can't see it no more, it's all nothin', just bricks an' smoke an' all. Yeah, we seen it! We was right there!"

This was happiness! This was glory! This was living! Martha could see it in the lads' eyes, hear it in their voices, feel it in their gestures. This was the happiness that she, too, had known—she and Basil, glorying in their young daring and in the young strength of their limbs as they raced hand in hand through the gunfire in the

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empty, blacked-out streets, along a razor edge of death, experiencing such an ecstasy as she would never know again . . .

Unless? This very night? Just once more? Would this dream, this magic, whatever it was—would it last just long enough for that? Were the gods indeed granting her, after thirty stagnant years, another chance?

"I must go," she repeated, almost choking with hope. "My boy friend's waiting for me"—and brushing aside the kindly protests of the shelterers, she set off running up the long, long spiral stairs that led to the outside world.

Yes, running. If she had not guessed it already, from the tremulous joy in her heart, she knew now, for certain, that she was young again. These winding, endless flights of steps meant nothing to her young limbs as she skipped and bounded upward, the stolen dress bumping and swinging against her as she ran.

So *this* was why she had chosen it—a dress for a young girl, so slim, so gay, so daring! She had known all along that it was right for her, for her real, true self.

Faster she ran, and faster; up and up the echoing spiral curves, up and up, on and on, tireless as a mountain deer, knowing that there, at the top, Basil would be waiting.

Every evening since the beginning of the Blitz he had waited for her up there. Night after night he would come rushing from his job in the West End, all the way out here, just to meet her as she came out of the tube, and to escort her safely along the Mile End Road to her home. Together they would race through the black, deserted streets, the crack of gunfire in their ears, and the shrapnel clattering on the pavements before and behind.

They met no one—the empty, perilous streets belonged only to them; and as they tore through the whistling, death-ridden dark, Martha had realized, even at the time, that she would never know such happiness again.

"You shouldn't!" she sometimes said to Basil, as she came out of the tube station into his waiting arms. "You shouldn't! You should stop up West, it's safer up there." But always he just laughed, as of course she had known he would.

"Don't worry, love!" he would answer, his strong arms encircling her in the savage dark. "Don't worry, I'm as safe here as I'd be anywhere. What I always say is, if it's got your number on it, you'll get it, no matter *where* you are!"

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How wrong he was!

She was nearing the top of the stairs now. Faint gleams of blueish light from the ticket office were beginning to play dimly on the curve of the wall, and she was becoming aware of sounds from the outside world. The crackle of gunfire; the clatter of a warden's boots, running; and in the ensuing silence, she became aware of a tension, a sense of approaching climax, which was the only memory she had of that last night. The only *clear* memory, anyway—the rest had been a blur of all-enveloping horror. What *had* happened, exactly?

She had been nearing the top of these spiral steps, she remembered, just as she was now—the lifts were always put out of action as soon as the sirens went on, and so climbing up these spiral stairs when she came home from work had become a familiar routine.

Yes, she had been just at the top of the flight, just coming out into the station entrance, when she had known, suddenly, that something was going to happen. She did not know how she knew, for there was no sound, no explosion, no ominous whistling of an approaching bomb.

She learned afterward that when a bomb is coming *really* near, right on top of you, you don't hear the whistling. But she didn't know this at the time. All she was aware of, in those last moments before the end, was a peculiar, waiting stillness. The whole sky seemed to be leaning outward, somehow, the air was opening out silently, like a flower, and then a voice—the ticket collector it must have been—was screaming at her.

"Get down! Get down!" he had yelled, pushing her back.

But he couldn't have forced her back if she hadn't let him. Already she had glimpsed Basil running across the street toward her, and she could, if she had chosen, have run forward to meet him, not back into the safety of the stairs.

But back, in fact, she had run; down and down, round and round, spiraling down, down, down into safety, while outside the earth rocked to such an explosion as she had never dreamed, and that her mind could not grasp. Her ears were deafened, and her mind was blacked out, and afterward she could remember almost nothing of how it had been.

People were very kind. "How dreadfully sad!" they said, and "You mustn't reproach yourself, there was nothing you could have done to save him." And of course they were right.

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Or were they? How could they *know?* How could *anyone* know? If just one person, once, in the whole history of the world, had done just one thing differently from the way he or she in fact had done it, who could say that it would not have changed the whole future of mankind? Who could tell whether, if Martha had run forward toward Basil instead of backward into safety—who could tell if, locked in each other's arms, they might not have had one of those miraculous escapes, some bizarre fluke of blast hurling them somehow into safety? One read of such things. Who could tell? Who can ever, anywhere, say with certainty what *would* have happened *if* . . .

If she had pushed past the well-meaning ticket man. *If* she had defied all her own instincts of self-preservation. *If* she had raced out into the black jaws of death, crying "Basil! Basil! I'm here!"

"Ticket, please."

Martha stared, stupidly, as the man at the barrier waited, hand outstretched. Outside, the commonplace light of peacetime gleamed on the wet streets, and she could feel the weight of her 55 years in every limb.

"I—I'm sorry!" she muttered, fumbling in her bag, searching, trying to remember if she had even bought one.

Soon, though, the small fuss was over—she could tell from the man's bored, patronizing manner that he wasn't going to honor with serious reproof such an idiot criminal as this—one who didn't even know which station she'd got on at, let alone which station she was at now. So he shrugged, charged her 20 p. and let her go, out into the wet alien night, 30 years and more away from home.

She was late getting home, of course, just as she had feared, and Leonard was angry. He was angrier still when, later that evening, the store manager phoned him about the dress. The man was less apologetic this time about bothering so important a person as Leonard, and less inclined to hush the whole thing up.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, "but I'm afraid it can't go on. Yes, I know you always see to it that we get the goods back or pay for it, and—yes, yes, I know, but that's not quite the point, is it? I do appreciate your position, and you have my sympathy, but all the same next time I'm afraid it will be my duty . . ."

Martha, listening in on the bedroom extension, heard her husband slam down the re-

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ceiver, and she waited, crouched against the pillows, for the familiar storm to break. Leonard's face, as he entered the bedroom, was angrier than she could ever remember.

It came to an end, though, at last. Even the most blazing row cannot go on forever. It ended, as it always did, with Martha in tears and making hysterical promises never to do it again.

But this time, with a sort of weary contempt in his voice that Martha had never heard before, Leonard extracted from her a further promise—not merely never to do it again, but actually never to go shopping by herself again.

"Do you understand, Martha? You can go into Town only if someone will go with you—your sister, or one of your bridge friends—but you are *not* to go to the West End shops by yourself any more. Do you understand?"

And Martha, still sniffling, said she did. She promised to do exactly as he said, and the next morning, the moment he had left the flat, she set off for the West End.

Not for the shops, though. Oh, no, she had an errand now a thousand times more important than going to any shop, and a thousand times more exciting. Somehow, somewhere, she must find once more the magic tube station, the gateway into the world of her youth, the world where she belonged, the only place where she had ever truly lived.

It must be somewhere! All that day—and the next, and the next—she traveled up and down the Central Line, getting out at this station and at that, randomly, but nowhere could she find the station of her dreams.

She did not despair. It *must* be somewhere, it *must!* Perhaps the magic only worked if you got *on* at the right station as well as getting off at the right one. Which station *had* she got on at, that fateful night? Oxford Circus? Bond Street? Marble Arch? It might be any of them—or even Tottenham Court Road, or Holborn.

This added alarmingly to the possible permutations and combinations, but Martha was not disheartened. Each evening, when she got home from her fruitless search, she would lock herself in her room and plan out her next day's itinerary: start from Marble Arch this time and get off at Bow; then back to Marble Arch and start again, this time getting off at East Ham.

Leonard noticed the strange, furtive eagerness about her these days, the secret purposefulness, and at first it worried

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him; but as the days went by and there were still no phone calls from any of the stores he began to relax. Perhaps, after all, she was keeping her promise. Perhaps she had even reformed.

It was at the end of the third week that the call came; and when, with weary dread, he picked up the phone, it wasn't a store manager on the line at all. It was the police. His wife, they were sorry to tell him, had been killed in an accident just outside Mile End Station. A quite extraordinary accident—at the moment, it all seemed quite impossible to explain—

It remained impossible to explain. Police, doctors, forensic experts were all equally at a loss. What sort of vehicle could it have been, and traveling at what sort of speed, to have inflicted the extraordinary injuries sustained by the deceased?

There seemed to be no clues at all. And of all the people who must have been present at the time of the accident—it was during the evening rush hour—only one came forward as a witness, the ticket collector at Mile End station. And, really, he might as well have saved himself the trouble, so nonsensical was the story he had to tell, and so unhelpful to the serious investigation that was being undertaken.

On the night of the tragedy, he claimed, he had noticed this woman coming up off the train. She was plump, middle-aged, in no way remarkable; and the only reason he had noticed her was that she was running at top speed right toward the barrier. Thinking she was trying to get through without a ticket, he had reached out and grabbed her arm; accustomed though he was to fare dodgers of all sorts, he had been amazed by the violence of her struggles.

"Let me go! Let me go!" she had screamed. "It's got my number on it!"

Thinking she must be referring to some sort of season ticket or special pass, he had relaxed his grip for a moment, expecting her to produce such a document; and in that split second she had broken free, charged through the barrier, and was out into the street.

And then? Well, all he could say was what he had actually seen with his own eyes; let them make of it what they could. As the woman ran, still at full speed, across the pavement outside the station, she had fallen in pieces. Yes, in pieces.

No, nothing had hit her. She hadn't tripped or stumbled. She

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had simply fallen in pieces while he watched. Her whole body had quietly disintegrated into a dozen bits that scattered this way and that across the pavement.

And from this statement the ticket collector would not budge.

The police could make nothing of it. And poor Leonard, when he arrived on the scene, was just as baffled. Lawyer though he was, he didn't even make a very good job of identifying the body. It should have been easy for him, because, as it chanced, the head and face had escaped all damage.

"I—I suppose it must be her," he said slowly, staring down at the familiar features.

Familiar, and yet wholly unfamiliar. As he gazed into his wife's dead face, Leonard wondered, in his clear, precise, legal mind, where all that beauty had been hidden during their marriage, and all that happiness on her face.

"Q"

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the *NEWEST* parody-pastiche by

JON L. BREEN

Well, it's closed season again in the public preserves of Wonderland, and the hunted are out in force, taking pot shots at the hunters. But beware, dear critic, of 'tec fever . . .

C.I.A.: CUNE'S INVESTIGATORY ARCHIVES

Sporting Blood Dept.:

The Swedish Boot Mystery

by JON L. BREEN

On a morning in early November 1970—some mysteries are timeless, but in this one the date is vital—Inspector Cune of Centre Street threw up his birdlike hands in ill-concealed exasperation. He had completed six circuits of the apartment he shared with his son, mystery novelist E. Larry Cune, pacing first one room and then another as though in search of a misplaced snuffbox—though in reality it was nothing so simple as that—before his son looked up sedately from his morning paper and inquired what the problem was.

"I'm baffled, son, that's all."

E. Larry looked over the front page inquiringly. "I don't see any headline that says the police are baffled, dad."

"The papers wouldn't have it yet, son. As of that edition they don't even know that one of the city's top sports columnists, Bert Gunning, was murdered last night. They found his body at three A.M., too late for the home editions."

"Dad, you didn't tell me," E. Larry chided.

The Inspector sighed. "I can't come running to you with *all* my problems."

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"Let's hear the facts."

"Very little to tell. Gunning was found dead in his office at the *Globe*. He'd been kicked to death with a football shoe. From the force and accuracy of the blow we're absolutely positive that a professional place-kicker must have done the job."

"Dad, that's remarkable! You've narrowed the field to a fairly exclusive fraternity, I must say. And only a few hours after the crime."

"But which professional place-kicker, son? That's the hang-up. Do you know how many pro-football teams there are within a couple of hours of New York City? And none of their place-kickers has an alibi for this morning at three!"

E. Larry mused. "Dad, was he kicked with the toe or the side of the foot?"

"Side of the foot."

"Then that should narrow it even more—to soccer-style kickers."

"We thought of that, son. But they nearly all have soccer-style kickers now."

"Oh. Any idea what the motive might have been?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. Gunning claimed in his column a few days ago that one of the professional football teams had become heavily involved with gambling. He was planning to break the story and cause a scandal that would rock football. But he didn't name the team. It may have been that the place-kicker of the team involved did the job to silence him. But which team was it? We're baffled, I tell you!"

"Didn't he give any clue in his column as to which team he meant?"

"Sure, but it's all gibberish." The Inspector passed E. Larry a clipping from a paper published earlier in the week. The clipping read:

"My sources say that I mustn't reveal for another week which team will be involved in this momentous scandal, but I can give you a hint by naming some of its offensive-team personnel. Spiro Agnew plays center, Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey are the guards, Jack Benny and Rex Stout the tackles, Ralph Nader is the tight end, Jane Fonda and Barbra Streisand are the wide receivers, Paul Newman and John Updike the running backs, and this celebrity team is quarterbacked with consummate skill by John F. Kennedy, Jr."

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"See what I mean, son? Makes no sense whatever."

E. Larry studied the clipping for a moment, then rushed to the bookshelf and took down a pro-football yearbook. He thumbed through it for a few seconds, hurriedly made a list on a memo pad, dashed to *Who's Who in America* as if to verify his deductions, and then said, "Dad, here's a list I made of the names and numbers of the New York Tartans' offensive starting lineup:

Center	52	Bill Drury
Right Tackle	76	Bob Colt
Left Tackle	83	Hans Wooden
Right Guard	57	Caesar Straw
Left Guard	59	Perry Christian
Tight End	36	Barney Chang
Wide Receiver	32	Clay Urn
Wide Receiver	28	Buck Kumquat
Running Back	45	Jose Trafalgar
Running Back	38	Andre Talcum
Quarterback	9	Tom Lane

"And, dad, the murderer of Bert Gunning is none other than Sven Junquist, their field-goal specialist!"

CHALLENGE TO THE READER: How did E. Larry identify the gambler-controlled team referred to in Bert Gunning's column? What was the meaning of Gunning's cryptic celebrity lineup? Match wits with E. Larry Cune!

Inspector Cune leaped to the phone and dialed headquarters to order the immediate arrest of Sven Junquist. Then he asked in birdlike bewilderment, "How did you know, son?"

"Don't you see, dad? All I had to do was find a team whose numbers coincided with those in Bert Gunning's imaginary team."

"But celebrities don't have numbers!"

"Sure they do. They have—"

The phone rang and Inspector Cune picked it up. "Cune here." The Birdlike Bulldog of Centre Street listened for a few moments, then said, "Good work, Healey," and set down the receiver. "He's confessed. But, son, I still don't see the connection between the Tartans' numbers and the numbers on Gunning's celebrity team."

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"Now look, dad," said E. Larry, his silver eyes gleaming. "The center on Gunning's team is Spiro Agnew, right? The Tartans' center is number 52. Gunning's tackles are Jack Benny and Rex Stout. Their Tartan counterparts wear numbers 76 and 83. Now look at the rest of the names and corresponding numbers: Nixon, 57; Humphrey, 59; Nader, 36; Fonda, 32; Streisand, 28; Newman, 45; Updike, 38; Kennedy, Jr., 9. Don't you see—"

"You mean—"

"Of course! Their ages, dad, their ages."

"Q"

A companion piece to Mr. Breen's parody . . . in which the real McQueen proves the McBreen point . . .

This is the first appearance of "The Three Students" in EQMM . . .

THE THREE STUDENTS

by ELLERY QUEEN

The membership of The Puzzle Club numbered six (one of whom, Arkavy the Nobel biochemist, was almost never free to attend a meeting), making it—as far as Ellery knew—the world's most exclusive society.

Its only agenda was to solve mysteries made up by the members and then, regardless of outcome, to slaver, sample, and gorge at the feast prepared by the master chef of their host and the Founder of the Club, Syres, the oil multimillionaire. Members took turns playing problem solver, and this evening

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the rotation had come round to Ellery again.

Having been duly installed in the "problem chair" in Syres's wide-open-spaces-style penthouse salon, Ellery tilted the bottle at his elbow and then settled back with his glass to face the music and its composers.

Little Emmy Wandermere, the Pulitzer Prize poet, had been designated to conduct the overture. "The scene is the office of the president of a small college," she began, "the office being situated on the ground floor of the Administration Building. President Xavier—"

"X," Ellery said instantly. "Significant?"

"You're a quick starter," the poet said. "In this discipline, Mr. Queen, significance lies in the ear of the listener. I should like to go on. President Xavier has one child, a grown son—"

"Who is, of course, a student at the college."

"Who happens to be nothing of the sort. The son is a high-school dropout immersed in the study of Yoga and Zen."

"His name?"

"Ah, his name. All right, Mr. Queen, having consulted my instant muse, she tells me that the son was christened Xenophon, President Xavier having taken his doctorate in Greek history. Now Xenophon Xavier has just become engaged to be married—"

"*To* a student?"

"You seem to have students on the brain. Not to a student, no. She's a topless exotic dancer Xenophon met through his guru. May I suggest that you listen, Mr. Queen? The boy's father—and if you want to know President Xavier's Christian name, too, by the way, it's St. Francis—has undertaken to provide the engagement ring. He's just come from visiting his safe-deposit box, in fact. The first thing President Xavier does on entering his office is to place the ring on his desk. It's a very valuable ring, of course, a family heirloom."

"Is there any other kind?" Ellery asked mercilessly. "Whereupon," and he paused to sip his Scotch, "enter Suspects."

Syres nodded. "A delegation of three students who represent three dissident groups at the college."

"One," said Darnell, the lawyer, "a law student named Adams."

"Two," said Vreeland, the psychiatrist, "a medical student named Barnes."

"And three," said Poet Wandermere, "a literature major named Carver."

"Adams, Barnes, Carver,"

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Ellery said. "A, B, C. We're certainly relying on basics tonight. But proceed."

"Adams, the law student, demands that the football team's star pass receiver, who's been expelled from the school after a secret hearing," said Lawyer Darnell, "be reinstated on the grounds that he was the victim of a star-chamber proceeding and had been denied due process."

"The college expelled its star receiver?" Ellery shook his head. "This is obviously a fantasy."

"Derision, Queen, will get you nowhere," Dr. Vreeland said severely. "As for Barnes, like many med students he's sex mad, and he's there to demand that the curfew restrictions for coeds visiting the boys' dorms be lifted entirely."

"And young Carver is there," Miss Wandermere said, "to demand a separate and autonomous Black Culture Department staffed entirely by blacks."

"There's a lively discussion, President Xavier promises to take the three demands under advisement, and the students exit." Syres held up his saddlelike hand. "Not yet, Queen! Xavier then goes to lunch, locking the only door of his office. He's away, oh, twenty minutes—"

"A fast eater," Ellery murmured.

"When he unlocks the door on his return, he notices two things. The first—"

"Is that the ring, which with convenient forgetfulness he'd left on his desk," Ellery said promptly, "is gone."

"Yes," Darnell said, "and the second is a folded slip of paper lying on the floor near the desk."

"Which says—?"

"Which says," and Dr. Vreeland showed his formidable teeth like a playful wolf, "in unidentifiable block lettering, naturally—are you paying attention, Queen?"

"Which says," Emmy Wandermere said, "as follows: 'On old Olympus' towering top/A Finn and German viewed a hop.' Terrible verse. I can thankfully say, Mr. Queen, I'm not responsible for it."

Ellery mumbled, "Would you mind repeating that?"

The challengers exchanged congratulatory smirks. Miss Wandermere cheerfully repeated the doggerel.

"Nonsense verse." Ellery was still mumbling. "Or . . ." He stopped and shook his head like a fighter shaking off a stiff jab. "Let's hack away the underbrush first. Was the door tampered with?"

"I'll make it simple for

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you," Syres said in a kind voice. "Entry was by the window, which had been forced. No fingerprints. No clues."

"I take it that during their visit to Xavier's office, Adams, Barnes, and Carver had the ring in plain view?"

"Right there on the desk," Dr. Vreeland said. "They all saw it."

"Who else knew the ring was in the office?"

"No one."

"Not even his son Xenophon?"

"Not even his son Xenophon."

"Or his prospective daughter-in-law?"

"That's right."

"Was the ring visible from the window?"

"It was not," said Miss Wandermere. "It was lying behind a bust of—"

"Xanthippe, I know. Was there an open transom above the door?"

"No transom at all."

"A fireplace?"

"No fireplace."

"And you wouldn't insult me by a secret passage. Well, then, the thief has to have been one of the three students. Which is the conclusion I assume you wanted me to reach."

"True," Darnell said.

"And Xavier is positive the paper with the verse wasn't on the floor when he left for lunch?"

Glances were exchanged once more. "We hadn't thought of that possibility," the oil man confessed. "No, Queen, the paper wasn't there when Xavier left the office."

"So it must have been dropped by the thief."

"Accidentally, Queen," the lawyer said. "It was later learned that the thief took a handkerchief out of his pocket to wrap around his hand—he didn't want to leave fingerprints—and as he did so, the paper fell out of his pocket."

"He made off with the ring," the poet said, "without noticing that he'd left the verse behind."

"So you don't have to ask any further questions," the psychiatrist said. "Tough one, Queen, isn't it? We were absolutely determined to stump you tonight. And by the superegos of Freud, Jung, and Adler, friends, I believe we've done it!"

"Give a fellow a chance, will you?" Ellery growled. " 'On old Olympus' towering top/A Finn and German viewed a hop.' "

"We've got him on the run, all right," the oil king chortled. "Usual one-hour time limit, Queen. Mustn't keep old Charlot's dinner waiting. What is it?"

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Emmy Wandermere: "Oh, no!"

Dr. Vreeland: "Impossible!"

Darnell, incredulously: "You've got it?"

"Well, I'll tell you," Ellery said with unruffling brow, a vision of peace. "Yes."

" 'On old Olympus' towering top/A Finn and German viewed a hop,' " Ellery said. "As verse, it's gibberish. That made me dig into my gibberish pile, which is eighty feet higher than Mount Everest. My curse is that I never forget anything, no matter how useless.

"Having recognized the nature of the verse, I knew the thief couldn't have been Adams, the law student, or the lit major—much as you tried to make Carver your red (or should I say black?) herring.

" 'On old Olympus' towering top' et cetera is a traditional mnemonic aid for remembering the names of the twelve cranial nerves. The 'o' of 'On,' for instance, stands for 'olfactory'—the olfactory nerve; the 'o' of 'old' stands for the optic nerve: and so on. The verse is used in medical schools by students. The paper therefore dropped from the pocket of Barnes, the med student, making him the thief of the ring."

"I could have sworn on my plaque of Hippocrates that you'd fall flat on your face when I suggested this one," Dr. Vreeland said glumly.

"*Queen erat demonstrandum*," Emmy Wandermere murmured. "And now, gentlemen, shall we render unto Charlot?"

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Very often a new writer's second story reaches us before the first story has had time to be published. Often we have even published a new writer's first and second stories back to back in the same issue. But sometimes we have to wait a considerable period for a new writer's second effort. Seldom, however, as along as we waited for Eleanor Boylan's . . . Her first story appeared in the April 1959 issue of EQMM. Now, more than fourteen years later, we give you her second story—a little gem . . .

THE HARDEST PART OF ALL

by ELEANOR BOYLAN

What do you do with a suicide note? What do you do after reading it once through, then fleeing from the room, closing the door on the still figure on the bed? You don't panic, Beth told herself numbly, you don't scream. You drop the note, as you might a snake, onto the kitchen table and stare and stare at it, knowing it must be given to the police as evidence.

The police. Yes, the police. She moved stiffly to the wall phone and took down the receiver. She said to the dial tone, "I want to report a suicide. My husband's." And then, as the hum mocked her, she began to cry convulsively and dialed Operator.

Beth had never called the police for anything in her life. She remembered her mother once phoning the sheriff when she'd thought the shadowy figure in the yard was a burglar. It had turned out to be Beth's father tipsily mistaking the henhouse for the kitchen door. They'd all laughed then. They'd laughed a lot back on that farm despite Dad's small disgraces. At least they weren't big, ugly, terrible ones like—Beth gasped her message into the phone and ran out of the door and across

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the hall to Millie's apartment.

The police were wonderful. Kind, comforting, efficient, tactful. They were everything she'd been taught they were in her Girl Scout days. She'd never listen to another joke about the police again, she told herself. And now they were gone. Everybody was gone—even Roger. Her beloved, her darling husband; and he was gone forever.

They had taken him out, remote and covered on a stretcher, and her nice neighbor Millie had held her hand and said not to look and that there was a reason for everything. More people had come during the day. The special officer who took away Roger's cocoa mug with its dreadful dregs; reporters; somebody from Roger's bank; neighbors from other apartments.

But now they were all gone. Even Millie, who had a family, something Beth wouldn't have now, two little girls who must be fed supper—Millie was gone with promises to return later. And Beth was alone.

She sat at the kitchen table and stared at the funny wall plaque that said: *God Bless Our Mortgaged Home.* Hands folded in front of her, she moved her gaze to the face of the kitchen clock and realized that it was 6:30, the hour at which Roger usually breezed through the door and announced the disaster of the day.

When had it all started? And when had she begun calling his daily escapades "disasters?" Surely they weren't all so terrible. Some were hilarious for Roger was quite a raconteur as well as a spoiled, handsome young man who earned less than he said he needed and spent more than he earned and kept the kind of company that her mother would have called "shady."

But then what was so bad about Lennie Harris? He had nine children and his wife was president of the St. Brendon's Tabernacle Society. Lennie loved horses, that was all. And who wouldn't ache from laughing at Tom Lattimer's jokes or be glad to see him walk into your kitchen telling you you're the most adorable nag in town. She *was* a nag, she knew it. She had to be. But to be told you're an *adorable* nag is disconcerting and rather endearing.

But no more, no more. The fun was over, and the fear and foreboding were over, and in their place were grief and disgrace. Beth folded her arms on the table and dropped her head into them and wept.

Police Inspector Farnsworth said afterward that he'd had to

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ring three times and then knock and was beginning to be concerned; but Beth had finally opened the door, her face streaked from crying, and gestured him into the small, attractive living room. Actually she felt an enormous relief at the sight of the policeman. He was her father's age—at least, the age at which she remembered her father—and she felt an urge to reassure him that she was going to survive this and go on living. Perhaps also to reassure herself.

"You see, Roger was a kind and loving guy," she said quietly as they sat over coffee. "He never once deliberately hurt me or embarrassed me or scolded me. I was the one who did all the scolding. He was just"—she stared at the ceiling—"I suppose you'd call it a compulsive gambler, and he couldn't seem to help himself. I mean, he really couldn't. Do you believe me, Inspector?"

He nodded. "Sure do. His type is fairly common. They'll bet on anything. If he were sitting here now he'd probably make a bet with me before I got out of the room. Maybe bet that the phone would ring in less than five minutes. Five bucks the phone will ring in three minutes. I knew a guy—a cousin of mine, actually—he looked at a bunch of roses he'd sent his wife when she was in the hospital having a baby and bet that two of the buds would be open by morning. Never mind the baby—he couldn't think of anything but those buds. Went to the hospital next morning and collected from one of the nurses. Weird."

Beth had been nodding vigorously. "That's just the way Roger was. I kept telling him there is a group like Alcoholics Anonymous called Gamblers Anonymous—"

Farnsworth smiled. "My cousin belonged. For all the good it did him."

"Roger wouldn't even join. He'd say, 'You want to spoil my fun, baby? You want to spoil my few kicks?'" Her voice began to shake. "But it wasn't a few kicks, not when he started talking about the money at the bank. Of all places for a compulsive gambler to work—a bank!"

Beth rose and began walking distractedly about the room thrusting her hands through her long dark hair. Should she tell this kind man about last night's terrible showdown? About Roger's white face as her harsh words hit him. "There are some people who believe that disgrace is worse than death and I happen to be one of them!" Farnsworth was speaking—

"They called us from his

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department at the bank. Told us about the shortage. Confirmed everything you said."

She went on, scarcely hearing him, "He said to me a few weeks ago, 'Honey, it can't miss. This horse is an absolutely sure thing and the money will all be back in the bank when Old Whiskers gets in Monday morning.' But it wasn't *sure.* And the money *wasn't* back." She drew a deep trembling breath, a thought occurring to her for the first time.

"Why did you come here, Inspector?"

He leaned over to pat her hand. "I couldn't get you out of my mind. I felt a special kind of sympathy for you. I have a daughter about your age. What will you do now?"

Beth tried to focus her thoughts on the future. "I guess I'll go home. Back to Indiana. I'm a farm girl really. I met Roger at State College and he sold me on the bright lights and 'big' living. That was three years ago. We went back for a visit once but he was bored with the farm. The only thing that amused him was betting on when one of the calves would be born."

For a minute there was silence in the room, Beth staring into her coffee cup and Farnsworth regarding her with compassion. Then he drew the suicide note from his pocket, but she saw it and moved convulsively.

"Please! I don't ever want to see that again!"

He said gently, "I'm sorry. Don't look at it. But there's something I must ask you."

He opened the crumpled piece of paper and read aloud: 'Forgive me, love. You were so right. Tell Old Whiskers I ran out of the luck.' "

She nodded, whispering, " 'Old Whiskers' is Mr. Pemberton, Roger's boss."

Farnsworth said slowly, "Mr. Pemberton left the bank two weeks ago. I guess your husband just didn't happen to mention . . ." His voice trailed off as he looked at her.

Beth's face was as white as the wall she gazed at. No, he hadn't mentioned it. Among all the thousands of words of love, rage, and despair that had passed between them, those few simple words about his boss had not. Or perhaps she just hadn't heard them, those words that would have saved her.

Well, it was fitting that it should be the note. Crushing the tablets in his cocoa had been terrible; kissing him goodbye as he drifted off to death had been agony; but writing that simple little note had somehow been the hardest part of all.

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a NEW Miss Phipps story by

PHYLLIS BENTLEY

Wherever Miss Marian Phipps goes, in all her vocational and avocational pursuits, the spinster-novelist-and-amateur-detective bumps into the mysteries of life. And the mysteries of life are not always causes célèbres. Sometimes they are seemingly trivial—everyday, garden-variety little happenings. Sometimes they show only the tip of the iceberg, with the larger meaning invisible except to the mind's eye. And sometimes trivial incidents can have important romantic implications . . .

MISS PHIPPS AND THE SIAMESE CAT

by PHYLLIS BENTLEY

"Original plus two copies, double spacing, margins twelve and twenty-two, fresh page for each chapter, French words underlined—" began Miss Phipps.

"Punctuation to be followed exactly," concluded Mrs. Norton with a prim cough.

"Just so."

"It's a long time since you've visited the Norton Agency for typing, Miss Phipps," said Mrs. Norton, her tone slightly acid. "I thought perhaps you'd obtained a permanent secretary again."

"Oh, I have. A very nice girl. Very accurate. But at the moment she's *hors de combat*. Having a baby."

"Married, I hope," said Mrs. Norton with a sniff.

"Of course," replied Miss Phipps staunchly. "Now when can I have my finished typescript, please?"

"Well, you can't."

How she enjoys saying that, thought Miss Phipps, vexed. "Shall I take it elsewhere, then?" she said coolly, rising.

"No, no! I mean you can't

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have it done by me until the week after next."

"Oh, dear," fretted Miss Phipps.

"There's Maureen, however, or Bertha."

"Who's Maureen? Who's Bertha?"

"Bertha is my senior girl. Maureen did your last one."

"Oh, well, her work was satisfactory."

"Maureen, come here a moment."

A small slender girl with remarkably long golden hair rose from one of the desks in the crowded room a-clatter with typewriters. Miss Phipps noted with pleasure that this golden mane was beautifully brushed.

"You've nearly finished that report, Maureen?" said Mrs. Norton in a voice which would have frozen a polar bear.

"On the last page, Mrs. Norton."

"We'd better just look at your work together," suggested Mrs. Norton, holding out a hand to Miss Phipps for the script. "Is it a full-length novel, dear?"

"Just a short children's book," deprecated Miss Phipps, blushing and feeling embarrassed and inferior, as she always did when her writing was mentioned.

She reluctantly laid the script on the table in its folder, which she had tied round with string two ways to keep the pages within from slipping. If asked, Miss Phipps would have admitted frankly that while all the literary work on the script was as good as she could make it, the outside appearance was not altogether prepossessing, the folder being slightly dirty and dog-eared and the string knotted in several places.

Mrs. Norton, with her rather pompous little cough, advanced long-nailed fingers toward it, with an air of trying, for friendship's sake, not to show disdain. Miss Phipps hated to see those mercenary hands take hold of her precious writing—But that's not fair, she rebuked herself. She's a professional in her own line and proud of it, just as I am in mine.

While Miss Phipps was thinking this, the group had been joined by a new member. A Siamese cat, slim, brownish, young and handsome, had leaped onto the table and was now devoting tooth and claw to the dismemberment of the folder's string.

"No, no," said Miss Phipps mildly, gently laying aside a smooth brown paw.

The cat promptly scratched her.

"I don't mind a scratch or

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two," said Miss Phipps. "But not the string, please. *PLEASE!* No, pussy! No. I shall be cross!"

"She doesn't understand," purred Mrs. Norton. "She lives here, you see. This office is her home and she thinks she can do as she pleases. Now, Edith, dear."

"Who is Edith?" inquired Miss Phipps, looking interrogatively at Maureen, who was standing patiently by the table.

"The cat, of course. Called after my aunt, who gave her to me."

"Edith!" said Miss Phipps sternly. "Paws off, please!"

Edith bit the bow of the string, rolled over with that beautiful feline grace which is the admiration and despair of humans, and lying on her back, waving a couple of paws, seemed to invite praise. Since she had contrived to untie the string and wind it about herself in complex trails, Miss Phipps did not feel the slightest bit laudatory.

"You're a naughty cat, Edith," Miss Phipps said, snatching the precious folder from the table.

Edith scowled ferociously from yellow eyes.

"Well, really!" exclaimed Mrs. Norton. "Don't blame the cat! Maureen spoils her."

Indeed Maureen, smiling, had extended loving arms toward Edith.

"*You'd* better take her, Bertha," commanded Mrs. Norton.

A rather handsome girl, tall, with a composed face and a stack of fair curls piled up on her head, approached from her front-row desk with dignity, raised the bestringed Edith distastefully into her arms, and walked away.

"Let Bertha finish that report, Maureen," instructed Mrs. Norton, having flicked Miss Phipps's pages. "Begin Miss Phipps's script at once. I know she's always in a hurry."

Bertha, having detached the string, put Edith outside the door of the room, closed the door, and came back, walking with measured tread. Meanwhile Maureen retrieved Miss Phipps's script. She handled it respectfully, and Miss Phipps felt somewhat mollified.

"I'll give you a ring when it's done," offered Mrs. Norton.

They parted on cool but friendly terms.

The Norton Typing Agency occupied an office-apartment on the first floor of a large Victorian house. Outside the room Miss Phipps found Edith, glowering, seated at the head of the steps leading to the street. Miss Phipps was not at all disposed to let the cat approach

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within range of her typescript, so she took some pains to close the office door promptly. Edith tripped down the steps gracefully in front of her and sat at the foot, still glowering.

"Beautiful animal," conceded Miss Phipps. "Fine coat."

At the foot of the steps, leaning against the wall, was Geoffrey, Mrs. Norton's son, now an engineer apprentice. Mrs. Norton was a widow, and Geoffrey could have used a father, Miss Phipps thought, surveying his beads and style of dress. She had known Geoffrey since he was an infant, and greeted him in familiar tones.

"Hullo, Geoff. You've grown a good deal lately, I see."

"Hullo, Miss Phipps. Edith doesn't seem to like you, *I* see."

"We had a bit of a tiff upstairs," admitted Miss Phipps, noting the cat's still furious glaring and the lashing of her slender tail. "She's vexed."

"Well, wouldn't you be vexed if *you* were thrown out on your paws?"

"She wasn't exactly thrown out," objected Miss Phipps.

"That's what you think," said Geoffrey. "Now purr nicely for Miss Phipps, Edith."

Edith, in the haughty manner peculiar to cats, raised her head and stalked slowly off in the opposite direction.

Miss Phipps and Geoffrey laughed together. "Cats know how to administer the snub direct," said Geoff.

"None better. How's life, Geoff?"

"*Comme ci comme ca*," said Geoff without enthusiasm, scowling.

"If only all this hoo-ha nowadays made the young happier, I shouldn't mind," reflected Miss Phipps, moving toward a bus. "But it doesn't seem to, you know."

Three days later Miss Phipps, hearing the bell ring in her flat one evening, found Geoffrey, Maureen, and a neatly packed parcel at her door.

"Your script, Miss Phipps," said Maureen meekly, offering the parcel.

"Come in, come in!" exclaimed Miss Phipps, delighted. "Have some coffee." She tore off the wrapping hastily and gloated over the neat, professionally typed script. "You type very well, Maureen," she said with pleasure.

She was particularly enthusiastic because she thought Maureen looked rather downcast, indeed almost ready to cry. Of course it was obvious these children were madly in love with each other. They were both good-looking, even handsome. Geoffrey with fine dark eyes and masses of thick dark curls—pity he didn't cut them!

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And Maureen with that really glorious golden hair. A sweet face, too. They sat down. Miss Phipps gave them coffee. Nobody spoke.

"Is anything wrong?" asked Miss Phipps at length.

Maureen at once burst into tears. Geoffrey blushed.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear, I'm terribly sorry," apologized Miss Phipps.

"It's Mother," said Geoffrey with disgust. "She doesn't want us to get married."

"Aren't you perhaps a little—young?"

"Why should we waste all these years?" demanded Geoffrey, almost savagely.

"Well," began Miss Phipps. But on thinking it over, she couldn't find a particularly good reason, so she said nothing.

"Will you say a word to Mother? Persuade her?" urged Geoffrey.

"I don't think your mother would like that, Geoffrey," said Miss Phipps nervously.

"Oh, yes, she would."

"She thinks the world of you, Miss Phipps," said Maureen. "She's proud of typing your stories and all that. Isn't she, Geoffrey?"

"Yes. I don't read them myself, of course," said Geoffrey flatly.

Somehow this touch of honesty cheered Miss Phipps.

"When will you be out of your apprenticeship, Geoffrey?" she inquired.

"Next spring."

"Why not wait till then?"

"Yes, if we can have a firm promise from Mum for then. But to go on just hanging around isn't good enough. And she seems set against it. She prefers Bertha," concluded Geoffrey in a tone of disgust.

"The trouble is, you see," said Maureen sadly, "Mrs. Norton thinks I'm a bad worker—careless, you know—and so I should be a careless unreliable wife for Geoff. But I wouldn't," she protested, weeping again.

"Look, Maureen," said Miss Phipps, kind but firm. "You've just said two things to me. Since they contradict each other, one of them must be untrue."

Maureen looked up, horrified. "Oh, Miss Phipps! I wouldn't say anything untrue to you, truly, I wouldn't."

"You said Mrs. Norton is proud of typing my stories, and you said she thinks you're a careless worker. But she gives my stories to you to type. Don't you see? Either she doesn't care a button about me, or she doesn't think you're a careless worker."

"I'm not a careless person,

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Miss Phipps," said Maureen raising her head, with spirit.

"I believe you."

"Will you come and see Mum and put in a word for us, then?" pleaded Geoff.

"Perhaps."

"Tomorrow?"

"Well—I'll see."

As it turned out, the next morning Miss Phipps visited the Norton Typing Agency, but in a very different mood and on a very different errand. She raged up to Mrs. Norton's table, threw down the parcel of typing, and shouted, "That abominable cat!"

"What do you mean, Miss Phipps?" asked Mrs. Norton in her most genteel voice.

"If you will examine my original script, pages thirty through thirty-six, chapter four, and then examine your own typed version of chapter four, you will see that pages thirty through thirty-six have been omitted in your version. I have marked the passage with strips of paper."

"Maureen!" cried Mrs. Norton. Miss Phipps with regret could not help but detect an undercurrent of satisfaction in Mrs. Norton's voice. Maureen, pale and anguished, approached. "The carelessness can easily be remedied," said Mrs. Norton stiffly.

"It can, if my original pages are not lost," said Miss Phipps.

"What are you suggesting, Miss Phipps?"

"That abominable Edith tore them to shreds."

To Miss Phipps's astonishment Mrs. Norton burst into tears.

"I never typed those pages," said Maureen quickly. "I noticed they weren't there. But some writers make gaps, you know. It was the end of one section and the beginning of another, so I thought—"

Mrs. Norton continued to weep.

"Well, never mind, don't cry. I must rewrite that chapter, that's all. It's tiresome, but I daresay I can manage," said Miss Phipps, furious.

"You don't understand," wept Mrs. Norton.

"She's lost," whispered Maureen in Miss Phipps's ear. "Edith, I mean. She's disappeared. Last night, perhaps—she wasn't here this morning. We've searched the whole house. It's awful. Come with me."

She led the mystified Miss Phipps to the communal bathroom-cum-lavatory in the rear of the agency. The sash window was slightly raised. The bath was spattered with splashes of red oily liquid which Miss Phipps observed with horror.

"We don't like to clear it

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away," murmured Maureen. "Mrs. Norton doesn't know whether to send for the police."

"You don't think—" began Miss Phipps, aghast.

"Well, yes, we do really. Edith has vanished. She used to go down to the housekeeper in the basement, you see, at night, but the housekeeper hasn't seen her."

"But, my dear child—" began Miss Phipps. She wanted to ask where, if these were splashes of Edith's blood, was Edith's body? Nerving herself to a great effort of courage, she bent over the bathtub, dipped one finger in a crimson splash, and raised the finger to her nose. Then, to Maureen's exclamation of horror, she actually put the stained finger in her mouth.

"This, my dear Maureen," she announced triumphantly, "is cough medicine. It probably comes," she went on, raising her eyes to the glass shelves in the corner, "from that bottle up there."

"But how—but why—but where is she now?" objected Maureen, accepting the bottle of sticky red medicine as the obvious but still mysterious explanation.

"She was shut in here and was frightened and leaped about and knocked over the bottle."

"How could she get shut in here?"

"That is what we must find out."

"Where is Edith now?"

Miss Phipps strode to the window, threw up the sash, and gazed out. The landscape visible from this back window, as is true so often in central London, consisted of an architectural chaos—walls, mostly blank, roofs, chimneys, houses, snug little secret yards, with here and there one or two lean but courageous trees. Edith was not visible.

"She wriggled out of the window and fell down there."

"We must ask at every house in that back street, Miss Phipps," urged Maureen. "Come along."

As they proceeded down the street, building by building, Miss Phipps was struck by the kindliness and good humor shown to them. Some of the buildings were occupied by offices filled with clerks, some were still private homes. All the inhabitants looked rather cross when first summoned from their occupations to seek a lost cat, but then Miss Phipps had an inspiration.

"You see, the cat belongs to the mother of this young lady's boy friend," she explained.

They all melted at once, perceiving the romantic impor-

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tance of the cat to Maureen. They smiled sympathetically. "Really!" they said. "Well, come in, dear. She may be in the backyard, you know. We don't often go out there."

And that was just where Edith was, when at last they found her. In a corner of a dismal little yard, surrounded by high windowless walls, Edith lay on her front, with her paws neatly tucked in beneath her. The moment she saw Maureen, she sprang toward her, and safe in the girl's arms nestled against her neck, kneading her over and over with her paws and giving her loud, raucous purr.

"Fond of you, I daresay," said the elderly clerk with them.

"I hope so."

"She'll be hungry, poor thing. I'll get a drop of milk. I wonder how she got down here, I must say."

"She fell out of our bathroom window, I expect, and then made her way along, looking for a way out."

"That'll be it. Here you are, pussy. Lap this up."

"But how did Edith get shut into the bathroom?" queried Mrs. Norton, stroking the cat with the passion of a lonely woman. "I suppose the door must have slammed."

"I think Bertha slammed the door," said Miss Phipps, giving Bertha an accusing look.

"Why should I lock up Edith?" demanded Bertha.

"You destroyed my pages, you wanted Edith to be blamed for that, and Maureen to be blamed for allowing it to happen. For obvious reasons," added Miss Phipps.

"Nonsense," snapped Bertha. But she had crimsoned.

"Edith was frightened and rushed round the bathroom and upset the cough-mixture bottle. *You* recorked the bottle and replaced it on the upper shelf. *After* you had contrived that she fell out of the window."

"I didn't mean her any harm," cried Bertha. "She wriggled suddenly out through the open part of the window. I couldn't stop her. You know how quick cats are."

"Some cats I know are rather too clever for their own good," said Miss Phipps.

"If you don't care for cats, Bertha, you had perhaps better give your notice at once," said Mrs. Norton coldly. "I must get your replacement settled in before Maureen leaves to get married, in the spring."

"I should like to continue working for you after our marriage, Mrs. Norton," said Maureen mildly.

"Very well, dear," agreed Mrs. Norton.

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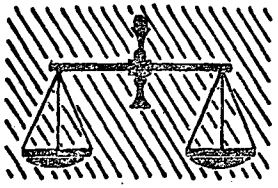

THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

Though the calendar may show an expiring year, once more I am compelled to write this in midsummer and in a dearth of material. Still! Since your mentor can recommend three new books, backing them up with only one triumphant classic of old, that's not a bad average for any given season.

Our very mixed bag runs thus:

Blackstone's Fancy, by Richard Falkirk (Stein and Day, $6.95), roars with the second adventure of Edmund Blackstone, hardest nail of the Bow Street Runners, in the roaring eighteen twenties under roaring old King George IV. Two months ago I praised Blackstone's first recorded case, when he thwarted a plot to kidnap Princess Victoria, child heir to the throne. Here, since prizefighting is against the law, he must pretend to stamp it out while secretly training his own candidate, Ebony Joe, as an opponent for Houseman, the Bristol Butcher.

Against the world of the bare-knuckle Fancy, recreated in all its color and brutality, parade lords, scullions, ladies, harlots, bookies, hangers-on for blood-spattered pugilism which becomes also blood-spattered murder. Our protagonist needs not only fists or firearms; he needs all his wits to detect the murderer. At the end of the decade, when Peel's plans mature, surely they will make him Mr. Superintendent Blackstone, Metropolitan Police? He's too strong a character for limbo; he must not fade or disappear.

When the call-girl is found messily murdered and headless at a midtown hotel in Lillian O'Donnell's *Don't Wear Your Wedding Ring* (Putnam, $4.95), we join the quest for her killer with Detective Third Grade Norah Mulcahaney, attractive Manhattan policewoman, and doughty Sergeant Joe Capretto. But the call-girl, it develops, was a well-to-do young married woman of good social background.

Quite a few affluent young matrons, as revealed by a second if less gruesome murder, have joined a part-time prostitution ring—run by whom? And why violent death as the end?

With new twists at every turn, always on an edge of nerves, Norah Mulcahaney and Sergeant Joe follow that wicked trail from

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Lark Enterprises to the airport motel, from victim Harriet Weitz to near-victim Carla Jarks. It seems hopeless; their best efforts achieve nothing but a disastrous bomb explosion until they gain the authorities' consent to Nora's daring ruse.

Detective Mulcahaney, apparently disgraced and dismissed, will pose as a call-girl recruit. To trap the ring-boss she risks her life and almost loses it at the sensational finale of police procedure admirably managed by a woman writer who knows the job.

In *The 92nd Tiger*, by Michael Gilbert (Harper & Row, $6.95), ever-reliable Mr. Gilbert turns from superior detection to a fast-paced adventure thriller vibrant with satiric comedy.

Star of British television as an all-conquering secret agent called the Tiger, for ninety-one triumphant episodes Hugo Greest has polished off the villain. Now that they're cancelling the series—despite immense popularity Hugo is almost forty—what next? There can't be any such role as the Tiger in real life?

But there can. Directed by the Foreign Office, accepting urgent invitation, our erstwhile Tiger becomes (of all things) military adviser to Sheik Ahmed of Umran in the Middle East.

And we believe it. Neither super-hero nor inept bungler, the real Hugo is intelligent, imaginative, and with a sense of humor; he captures our sympathies at once. Backed by the sheik, by the sheik's young son and by Tammy, the American heroine, Hugo coils his way through undercover dirty work to its eruption in outright war. By keeping both his head and his sense of humor, a true Briton, he emerges victorious, wins the girl, and lands an even better offer from the lords of television. Don't miss this one.

So far as I know, Richard Harding Davis's sensational masterpiece, *In the Fog* (1901), was the sole venture into mystery by that once-celebrated scribe. Though short enough to be included in a Modern Library anthology almost fifty years ago, it was published on its own by R. H. Russell, one of the illustrators being Frederic Dorr Steele, who immortalized William Gillette as Sherlock Holmes; and you may still find a copy at your friendly secondhand bookshop.

At a small and select London club, including the young American who calls himself Lieutenant Sears, each of various members adds his contribution to a tale of double murder in peasouper fog, building tension towards a totally unexpected double-twist end. "Davis, thou shouldst be living at this hour; Davis, thou wert well ahead of thy time."

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a NEW crime story by

JOAN RICHTER

About Steve Jaros, a TV news correspondent, just back from Vietnam, who is assigned to cover a strip-mining disaster in Appalachia—124 people killed and more than 3000 left homeless by a floodslide which the mining company claimed was an "Act of God," and which the miners blamed, not on the rains or the Almighty but on the company's negligence . . . a moving and meaningful story with an unusual theme and background.

"But nothing lives or grows here now—only human beings" . . .

THE WASTE PILE AT APPLE BOW

by JOAN RICHTER

He'd seen the destruction of the land from the air, the hills and hollows of the earth's flesh, scarred and scabbed under a helpless sun. But from the plane window it had been distant and unreal. It wasn't until the TV news correspondent had begun his climb up the steep mountain path, following the old miner, that he began to understand what the big mining interests had done to Appalachia.

By the calendar it was spring, but the only evidence of the land's rebirth was an occasional stalk of fern pushing up a clot of rotting leaves. His eyes smarted from the smoggy haze that hung like gray angel's hair from the branches of the unleafed trees. Steve Jaros licked his lips and felt the grime of coal dust rough under his tongue.

On the path ahead of him he heard the miner cough and he listened to the lingering rattle in the old man's chest. It was the only sound in the stillness beside that of their footfalls on

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the trail. There were no bird songs, no rustle of squirrels scurrying among the dead leaves. There was no sign of any animal life at all.

The strip mines and the smoldering piles of coal wastes that had been blackening the hills for years were now wrenching the last bit of life from the air and the soil.

He shifted the strap of his camera on his shoulder and undid the buttons of his suede jacket. Though the air was cold and raw, the exertion of the uphill climb had made him warm. Usually the camera wasn't his to carry, but when he'd learned that the mining company was refusing to talk to newsmen and that the miners were being equally silent, he'd decided to enter Apple Bow with a minimum of fanfare. He had come alone, leaving his cameraman and sound man back at the small hotel in Elkton, on the other side of the mountain.

The decision had one severe drawback. It meant he was limited to using the Filmo, a small camera without sound. Yet, had Charlie and Usher and all their equipment been with him when he'd walked into the schoolhouse now converted into a rescue shelter, he would have met with an even colder wall of reserve. He wouldn't have got any answers at all. He wouldn't be headed now for what was left of the waste pile overlooking the hollow of Apple Bow.

At least that's where he hoped Newt Boyd was taking him. But he wasn't really sure.

For more than half an hour they had been walking in silence, single file, following the steep rutted trail. Ahead of him, gun and game bag slung over his shoulder, the frail old man leaned into the steep incline. Now and again his shoulders shook with a fit of coughing.

When the trail showed signs of leveling off, Newt Boyd stopped and turned around. "Let's set here a minute." He moved off to the side and settled himself on a large boulder.

Across the way Steve leaned back against the trunk of a tree. As he slipped the camera from his shoulder he saw Newt peering at him, faded blue eyes staring intently from under wrinkled, drooping lids. The miner cleared his throat and Steve had the feeling that the pause in the trek up the hillside might have another purpose besides a rest.

"I suppose you heard the company's claiming that flood-slide was an 'Act of God.'"

Steve nodded. He'd heard

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the no-liability position the company had taken and he'd read the terse statement that used just those words—"Act of God."

"They're blaming the rains. Well, rains come every spring. But the company held off until the clouds were hangin' right in there between them hills before they did what they should have done months ago. The thunder and lightning was crackling so hard you couldn't hear nothin' on the radio. The rain was coming down in sheets. That's when they tried to blast, hoping to shore things up. But it was too late. There weren't nothin' that could have changed the course of that slide then."

"Are you saying the company *knew* that waste pile at Apple Bow was in danger of collapsing?"

"Sure they knew! Everybody around here knew it was restless. For more than a year we'd been listening to the rumbling and the shifting deep inside that heap, watchin' the water build up behind it, seein' it start to seep through. A survey done last year by some government inspecting team put Apple Bow on the list of piles to be shored up. But the company knew nobody was gonna come around to check, so they did nothin'—until it was too late."

Steve cast a frustrated glance down at the camera on the ground. It would do no good to film Newt Boyd without sound and there was no point in wishing Charlie and Usher were with him now. If only he'd be able to get Newt Boyd to repeat later the things he was saying now . . .

The miner turned sideways and pointed toward a distant spot through the trees. "See off there. There's another pile just like the one at Apple Bow."

Steve's eyes focused on a blackened mound, hooded by a layer of gray cloud. That's what Apple Bow had looked like, before the water had gathered behind it and turned it into a hurtling avalanche of rock and mud and coal waste. One hundred and twenty-four people had been killed and more than 3000 had been left homeless.

"There's hundreds of others of them piles, scattered all over these coal hills, all sitting and waiting until somethin' starts them shifting. Once they start there ain't nothin' that'll stop them."

There was no point in waiting any longer, Steve decided. Now was the time to broach the subject of filming the waste pile at Apple Bow. He could get what he needed with the Filmo. Later he'd try to

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persuade Newt to talk to him in front of the sound camera that Charlie and Usher had in Elkton.

"How about it, Newt? How close can we get to the pile at Apple Bow?"

The miner was gazing off in the distance, still looking at the other smoldering mound. His head turned slowly.

"You'd have to get mighty close to get any pictures of them bore holes where they put the powder when they tried to blast. The company's posted guards to make sure nobody comes snoopin' around. They got guns and orders to shoot anybody trespassing."

Steve knew about the guards, though he hadn't known they were armed. The way he saw it, the company's aggressive silence made it a sure bet they had something to hide. The miners weren't talking because they had something to fear. These suspicions, side by side, aroused not just his interest but his anger.

"There's going to be an official investigation in a few days, Newt. Then the company won't be able to keep anyone away, but I don't want to wait. I want that film now."

"Well, it ain't gonna be easy. Anybody going in there has a good chance of getting his head shot through. This ain't the first time a dam's broke in these parts and it's been the company's fault. It ain't the first time we had to go digging for our dead. There's always some hollerin' right afterwards and politicians make a lot of promises, giving us to believe something's gonna be done. Nothin' ever is. You don't know how powerful these big companies are."

Newt looked away, and against the gray day his profile was sad and lonely. A scraggly beard camouflaged his sunken cheeks, but the loose brown coat did little to hide the dejection and fatigue in the thin rounded shoulders.

Up until then Steve hadn't been able to put his finger on the whole of what was driving him after this story—why, when he had met a wall of silence to his questions, he hadn't simply been satisfied with recounting the details of the disaster and letting it go at that, returning when and if an investigation turned up new information. That was what other correspondents from other networks had done.

But he was incensed by the company's arrogance, its pontifical stand that an "Act of God" had caused the collapse of the waste pile. He bristled at their self-exoneration, while all around him he saw signs of

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their negligence and their culpability. His eyes swept over the gray-brown woodland, as barren as any he had seen in war zones, and he tried to imagine what it had been like before the mining companies had come, when springtime had meant trees in leaf, a ground cover of wildflowers, and small animals and birds stirring in the brush.

But there was yet another ingredient in the angry mix of his emotions that kept him after the story that lay buried in the rubble of maimed lives. It was what he saw in Newt Boyd's face now, in the droop of his shoulders and the set of defeat in his bones, what he had seen in all the faces at the rescue shelter, except in the girl's.

He remembered the toss of her blonde head, the resolute set of her chin, and the fiery flash of determination in her deep blue eyes. Even if she were not one of the prettiest young women he'd seen in a long time, she would have stood apart from the others, because of her spirit.

He couldn't rid himself of the feeling that she was responsible for Newt Boyd coming forward, that it was because of her that Newt Boyd was talking to him now.

The old man shifted his position on the boulder and cleared his throat. "There's somethin' you might not know. The company's got a way of drying up a man's living if he's heard complaining. That's one of the reasons them folks at the shelter wasn't saying anything."

"Why are you taking the chance, Newt?"

The old man shrugged. "Fed up. Tired of letting them get away with things. I'm not young any more. My family's grown. I got nothin' to lose."

Steve walked to where the miner was sitting and put his hand on his shoulder. "Newt, the public has been stirred up by what happened here. But people have a way of forgetting things that don't involve them directly. They have to be kept stirred up until the investigation gets started. If there are enough angry people around, demanding answers, the company's negligence and the government's ineffective inspection system won't get swept under the rug this time."

"How're you gonna go about doing that?"

"By keeping the story alive, by showing people what these hills look like, close up, by letting them hear what the miners and their families have to say. To begin with, I want film of Apple Bow."

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A light flickered in Newt Boyd's eyes, but in an instant it was gone. "You sure you understand what I've been telling you? Them guards have been hired to watch out for fellas like you. If they catch you spying or trespassing, or whatever you want to call it, they'll shoot, just as if you was a crow sittin' on a fence. And if needs be, afterwards, they'll say that's what they thought you was, a crow."

"Damn it, Newt, what else are you going to come up with? Are you going to take me there, or do I go alone?" Steve picked up his camera and slung it over his shoulder.

A grin creased through the scraggly beard. There was no mistaking the brightness in the faded blue eyes now. "Lorny said you can't tell a bird while he's all sleeked and strutting. You gotta get him a little ruffled to find out what's under all them feathers. That silk neck thing and that fancy suede jacket you're wearing had me thinkin' you might be all show and no innards. Guess I was wrong. Lorny will be mighty pleased with herself when she finds out."

He got to his feet with a sprightliness Steve hadn't seen before and said, "Let's go "

But Steve put a hand on his arm.

"Who's Lorny?"

"My daughter. Seen you eyeing her at the shelter. Pretty thing she is, but sometimes she's got a mind harder than a hickory nut. She's waiting lunch for us and I expect she's gonna be a bit fussed. We're late."

Steve wasn't about to be sidetracked. "What about filming Apple Bow, Newt?"

"Let's eat first and talk later. Lorny's got a plan."

Steve shook his head, exasperated. At least he'd been right about the girl. His curiosity mounted as he followed Newt back on the trail.

In a few minutes they rounded a bend and he saw a small gray house set back among the trees.

"Needs painting," Newt said. "Lorny was all for starting it this week. Said it would be good therapy, but I've not been of a mind. Since she's come, she's set herself to ironing curtains and washing windows, between helping down at the shelter. Long time ago her brothers and me promised her Ma we'd see she went away to school. Martha didn't want Lorny ending up like all the other women in the hollows, waitin' for their men to come up out of the mines. Lorny's been gone six years, graduated college most two years ago."

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"Where does she live?"

"Up north, works in the big city. Came right down when she got the news. She's talking about stayin' on, but this ain't no place for her."

Their voices must have carried into the house because the front door swung open and Lorny Boyd appeared in the doorway, blonde head tossing, an impatient hand on a slim jeaned hip.

"I should have known noon would mean closer to two!" A smile softened the reprimand in her blue eyes.

"Now let's not start in scolding, girl. I had a few things on my mind that needed straight'nin' out." He turned to Steve. "This here's my daughter, Lorna. Guess she knows you. Says she's seen you on TV. Can't say I have. Don't have a TV and when I get a chance to see one, don't watch the news. Don't watch them hillbilly programs either. Makes us mountain folk out to be a bunch of dumb jokers."

Lorna Boyd smiled and held out a slim smooth hand. "I thought you were still in Vietnam."

"I got back a couple of weeks ago. This is my first stateside assignment in a long while."

"How does it compare?"

An honest answer would have plunged them into a lengthy and morbid discussion, so he avoided it. "Any place you haven't been before is strange. It helps though when everybody speaks the same language."

"Do we?" There was the unmistakable glint of mischief in her eyes.

He responded with a slow grin as he followed her into the house. "There *have* been moments when I've not been so sure."

In a bathroom down the hall, where fresh white curtains framed a window that faced a hillside of scraggy oaks and pines, Steve splashed some water on his face and pulled a comb through his dark curly hair. For a moment he stared at his reflection, smiling, wondering if "sleeked and strutting" had really been her words, if that's the impression he had made on Lorny Boyd.

Because her speech still held some traces of mountain twang, she presented an interesting mixture of sophistication and hominess. Their brief exchange outside revealed a mind that was quick and pleasantly combative. Her time away from the hills must have changed her a great deal from the girl she had been. He liked the way her eyes sparkled, with a hidden challenge, and the way her

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yellow knit shirt hugged her gentle curves and fitted tidily into lean beige levis.

When he returned to the kitchen she was at the stove taking a platter of fried chicken from the oven.

She glanced up and smiled. "I hope you're hungry."

"I didn't realize how much until I stepped in here." He sniffed the air appreciatively.

"Everything's ready and Dad's waiting for you." She nodded toward a round table by the window where Newt was already seated and three places were set.

"How about a mite of whiskey?" Newt offered and reached for a jug on the floor at his side.

"I can't think of anything I'd like more," he said agreeably.

Newt filled two small glasses. "Goes down nice and easy." He handed one to Steve and waited. Steve tipped the glass to his lips, bracing himself. He'd had mountain brew before. But he was pleasantly surprised and nodded his approval.

"Local?"

"Don't drink nothin' else," Newt said, with a grin. "Two's my limit though. Doctor say I shouldn't drink at all account of the cough. But the few extra days it might give me ain't worth it."

Lorny joined them, adding a basket of warm buttered biscuits and a bowl of salad to the chicken that was already on the table.

"How did you manage all this?" Steve asked as she held the platter out to him. "You were still at the shelter when your father and I left."

She glanced quickly across the table and then back at Steve. "There's a short cut. It takes only about ten minutes to get up here."

Steve raised an eyebrow and looked at Newt.

The miner shrugged. "There was some thinking I had to do. Some questions that needed answering. Takes a while to figure out a man. Ain't sure I got you figured all the way, but I got a pretty good idea. Wanted to give you enough chances to change your mind."

"One more and I might have."

"Don't think so. You're the kind, the harder it gets, the more you want it."

Steve smiled. "Could be."

"But I think it's time we stopped being cagey and got down to business. First off there's somethin' you should know." Newt paused, his gaze lowered, hovering over his plate. Then his head came up. "Four of our kin were killed in that slide at Apple Bow—my

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two sons and my daughter-in-law and my four-year-old granddaughter. They was having the little girl's birthday party. I should have been there, only I'd been to Elkton to do some buying. Got held up because of the rain."

Steve drew in a long breath.

"Don't bother trying to say anything. There ain't nothin' anybody can say. But you gotta know from that I got no love for the company. And neither does Lorny. But up until you came along we weren't in agreement as to what to do about it. Right after it happened, before Lorny come down, I near went crazy. I took my gun and I went out looking for somebody to blame. I guess I would have shot the first company man I seen, except I got a bad coughing spell and could no more walk than I could shoot, so I come on home."

Newt looked toward a corner of the kitchen where the rifle and game bag stood. Steve followed his glance and felt frustration boil within him. A great story was unfolding before him. A newspaper reporter listened and went to a typewriter and wrote it down. But without film and a voice to go along with it, the story Newt was telling him was worthless for television.

"Lorny's got different ideas from the rest of us who've never been out of these hills. Mountain folk have always stayed to themselves, not mixing even with each other much. Lorny says we have to change our ways. Doing things alone ain't gonna get us nowhere now. We got to organize, she says."

Across the table, the smooth curves of Lorny's cheeks were touched with pink, and anger had once again crept into the deep blue of her eyes. She looked as she had at the shelter, determined and ready to fight.

She leaned toward Steve and spoke with quiet control. "You saw those people at the shelter today, patiently waiting to find out what was going to happen to them—women who had lost their husbands, miners who'd used their own picks and shovels to dig out their dead children. All of them homeless, victims of big-company negligence and power, grateful when a Red Cross worker gave them a bologna sandwich!"

Her blonde head tossed and her hand reached out and gripped his arm. "They don't know their rights or how to go about finding out what they are. Somebody has to help them! Someone has to show them how!"

Newt's head jerked in his

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daughter's direction. "Let's not start that again. I didn't send you up north so you could turn right around and come back here. This ain't no place for you, Lorny. Your mother will be crying in her grave."

She eased herself back in her chair and took her hand from Steve's arm. She looked at her father. "All right," she said softly. "We won't talk about that now."

"We're not gonna talk about it ever. Now that's settled." Newt banged his empty glass on the table. "Now suppose we get on with explaining your plan."

Lorna Boyd's blue eyes left her father and turned to Steve. "I'll take you to Apple Bow. We'll leave before dusk this afternoon and get there by dark. We'll stay overnight so we can be there at dawn before the guards get up. You should be able to get all the film you want, without their even knowing you've been there. If Dad took you, he'd be sure to get one of his coughing spells."

Steve looked at Newt. The pieces were beginning to fit. Up until now he still hadn't been able to figure out the miner's reticence to take him to Apple Bow. Now he at least had some idea what was behind it.

"She's somethin', ain't she? Worked this all out herself, even before you showed up at the shelter. Claims she knew you were the kind who wouldn't be satisfied without digging into things."

"What do you mean before I showed up at the shelter? How did you know I was coming?"

Lorny's blue eyes sparkled. "The man who tends bar at the hotel in Elkton is my uncle. He overheard you talking with your crew."

Steve shook his head, grinning slightly. "You've got as good a spy system as I've seen anywhere."

Newt chuckled. "I didn't like the sound of this idea at first, but I guess it will work out all right. How's it strike you?"

"So far so good, but Apple Bow isn't enough. I need you on film, Newt, saying the kinds of things you told me on the way up here, about the company knowing the pile was unstable and not doing anything about it until it was too late."

"Lorny said you'd want that. That's why I'm going to Elkton this afternoon and get those two fellas you left waiting there and that big camera."

"Is there anything you two haven't thought of?"

Newt shrugged. "Maybe. I'll get them and their stuff to the other side of Apple Bow, just across from where you're gonna

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be. Between the lot of you, you should get all the pictures you want. After that's done we can talk."

Steve looked at Lorna. "You the expert on TV equipment in this family?"

"I took an elective course in radio and TV techniques at college. I knew the camera you have with you now has no sound."

Steve eyed her appreciatively as she rose to clear the dishes from the table and returned with a pot of coffee. He forced his mind to return to the problem of the interviews he wanted. Now more than before it wouldn't be enough to talk only to Newt. Four members of his family had lost their lives in the slide. It would be natural for Newt's objectivity to be questioned. He explained this.

"What will it take to get some of the other miners to talk to me?"

Newt's eyes narrowed and his thin lips pursed. A thoughtful expression came to his face. "After tomorra morning you won't have no trouble. I promise you."

A look of apprehension darkened Lorna's blue eyes. "What are you planning to do?"

"Ain't telling nobody. So there's no use your pesting." Newt pushed his chair back from the table and rose stiffly. "Since it's a long ways to Elkton I'm gonna take a bit of rest. Wake me in an hour if I ain't up by then."

Steve called after him. "You can use the car I left a couple of streets away from the shelter."

Newt grinned. "I wondered if you'd get around to offering or if I'd have to ask—blue Chevy, ain't it, parked just a few yards from the post office?"

Steve shook his head as the miner walked down the hall to his bedroom. Then he turned to Lorna, "I have to hand it to you two. You sure have led me up a mountain path."

But this time her responding smile was only fleeting, overpowered by the concern in her eyes. "What do you suppose he's up to?"

"You're asking me?"

While Newt slept, Lorna Boyd drew a sketch of the area around the Apple Bow waste pile, showing Steve where she planned to take him; she also mapped out the approach his camera crew would follow on the other side.

"I find it hard to believe if we got that far without being stopped, the three of us couldn't just walk up to that pile and start filming. Those guards can't shoot all three of us and say we were crows sitting on a fence."

"I do believe we are

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beginning to speak the same language." The sparkle was back in her eyes. "No, I don't think they'd shoot the three of you. But they wouldn't let you film either. So what would that accomplish? The only way to do it is without their knowing."

She leaned toward him. "Steve, do you understand what this will mean to the miners? It will show them that the company can be challenged. Maybe their knowing that will be enough to convince them they should talk to you."

Her face brightened. "I bet that's what my father plans to do—take a few men along with him and let them see for themselves. You know people here don't know there's a difference between TV newsmen and the men who put on those awful hillbilly programs. My father didn't. It took a lot of talking to convince him. He didn't trust you. Why should they?"

Steve shook his head. "You're right. Why should they? Why do you?"

She wrinkled her nose at him. "I've been out in the big wide world. Besides, I need you to help me get things started here. My father doesn't like the idea of my coming back. I'm not really sure I want to. But sometimes I think it's the only right thing. To leave here and get an education and not come back and help out—"

"And here I've been hoping to see you in New York."

"That would be nice." She smiled wistfully. "It isn't easy to decide."

"None of the big ones are."

While she did the dishes, he wrote a note to Charlie and Usher, explaining what the plan was, enclosing the map she had made of the area surrounding Apple Bow.

Newt had been asleep almost an hour when the sound of coughing came from his room, deep and strangled. Lorna started down the hall, but stopped outside his door. In a while she came back to the kitchen.

"He's lived with it for so long now. But someday—" She left the sentence unfinished.

In a few minutes Newt joined them. "You got things ready for tonight, Lorny?"

She opened the door of a cupboard and took out three bulging pillowcases. "Blankets, food, and something to drink." She reached up to a hanger and handed Steve a heavy woolen sweater and a worn leather jacket.

"It will be cold tonight. What you're wearing won't be warm enough and besides you don't exactly melt into the landscape."

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He grinned. "I'll have you know I bought this jacket in Spain and the scarf came all the way from Bangkok."

"You don't say? Well, peacocks never were a part of these woods, and if they were, they'd be mighty scarce by now. So you'd better change your feathers or those guards will shoot you for the wrong reasons."

Steve threw his head back and laughed. Then, with a deliberate glance that ticked off her yellow knit shirt and the trim levis, he asked, "And what are you going to wear?"

"You won't recognize me when I've changed."

"You want to bet?"

Newt cleared his throat. "Listen, you two, this ain't no picnic you're going on. Don't go getting carried away with that kind of nonsense."

"What nonsense?" she asked, the color in her cheeks deepening.

"Listen here, girl, I'm not dead yet and besides my memory is pretty good. I can see it's a waste of time saying anything else, so I'd best just be on my way." He thrust out a bony, callused hand at Steve. "Maybe when this is all over you can do somethin' about them hillbilly programs. Keep an eye on her. She thinks she knows it all, but she don't."

Lorna kissed her father's cheek. "I'd forgotten how ornery you can be."

Newt started toward the door, then stopped, walked back across the room and hoisted his rifle and game bag over his shoulder.

Lorny's hand reached out. "Pa." In the one word her voice was a frightened child's whisper.

Newt patted her hand. "Don't go frettin' none. I've lived a long time and I know what I'm doing."

In the middle of the night Steve woke to a thick blackness all around him. There were no stars to be seen, only the dim shadows of the moon, hidden by a heavy layer of clouds.

Beside him Lorna Boyd stirred and he felt her breath sweep past his cheek, the soft silk of her hair brush his ear.

He lay still, waiting for the horizon of the dark night to become fringed with the glow of a coming dawn.

Before they'd left the house she had taken him around to the back where the spikes of crocus leaves had struggled up through the sour earth, the last of a garden her mother had planted years ago. Lorny had pointed out the roof of the schoolhouse below and the winding path of the short cut.

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"When I was a little girl there used to be bushels of violets to pick in the spring. My brother used to go hunting for raccoon and squirrel and wildcat. One summer a flock of bluebirds flew into that tree over there. But nothing lives or grows here now—only human beings."

Her face had been turned away from him, her thoughts involved in a private memory. He remembered thinking how lovely she was, even in the baggy dark gray coat that belonged to her father. In another time, in another woods, he would have turned her toward him and taken her in his arms and kissed her. But instead he reached for a stick and broke it in two.

Dawn now hovered below the horizon of the sky. He woke her and they untangled themselves from the coverings and rose, stretching cramped limbs. She poured them steaming coffee from a Thermos.

They were on the downward slope of the hillside, overlooking the high and the hollow of Apple Bow. As dawn lifted and the spread of light fanned upward into the sky, an ugly black sprawling shadow took shape in the shallow valley not far below, the dregs of the waste pile.

Steve began to film in regular intervals following the progression of dawn into day. While his eye was to the camera, a sudden beam of brilliant sunlight pierced the layers of cloud cover and with the accuracy of an arrow finding its mark it illuminated a string of bore holes at the base of the collapsed waste pile.

Beside him, Lorny touched his arm and pointed, exclaiming softly. He nodded and swept the area with the camera.

He lowered it and turned to her. "Look over there," he said softly, pointing to the opposite hillside. "Did you see that?" There was a sudden brief glint of light, there one instant, then gone, then repeated, with no set pattern.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Sun glancing off a camera lens. Your father got to Elkton. Charlie and Usher are where he said they would be." He wondered if Newt was with them. "Where are the guards?"

She held onto his arm and leaned forward, pointing to a spot just below them, still in partial shadow, not yet discovered by the sun. He could make out the shape of a lean-to.

He changed the film in the camera and put the reel he'd shot into a weatherproof bag.

"You stay here. I want to get a closer look," he said.

Her blue eyes defied him and

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he knew there was neither time nor point to argument. Newt had warned him she was strong-willed.

The ground was soft from the recent rains and any leaves left from previous years were damp and made no sound underfoot. The greatest hazard was the possibility of slipping, but there was enough low growth for them to catch onto, as they made their slow descent.

Suddenly the murmur of voices reached them and they stopped. Three figures emerged from the lean-to, burly men in heavy woolen coats. One had a shotgun, held lightly in his hand, the other two carried rifles. Steve raised the Filmo to his eye and followed the men as they fanned out into a semicircle and walked to a midpoint in the hollow.

As the three men spread out, Steve could see that their heads were raised, their eyes scanning the encircling hillside. For a moment he felt a pair of eyes looking directly at him, but they slid away without acknowledgement.

Across the way the glint of sunlight came and went again. The man with the shotgun called out and one of his partners lifted a pair of binoculars hanging from a strap around his neck and trained them on the hillside across the way.

Beside him Lorny's fingers grabbed and bit into his arm. But the camera was up to his face and he would not be distracted. The man with the binoculars let them fall to his chest and was bringing his rifle up to his shoulder.

"Steve!" Her voice beside him was an imperative hoarse cry. His eyes flashed toward her for an instant and he saw her face chalk-white against the dark gray of her father's wool coat.

But Lorny was not looking at the man with the rifle. Her face was turned sideward, eyes wide with terror, focused on the small bent figure coming up from the mouth of the hollow.

Steve watched as Newt Boyd picked his way amid the rubble of the wash, heading in a straight line for the three armed guards.

Across the way a sparkle of light glinted against the brown hillside. The guard's rifle was raised and aimed.

"Hey, what you fellas shooting at?" Newt's voice rang out clear as a shot in the hollow.

Three guns swung and fired. Newt Boyd staggered and fell still to the ground.

Over Lorny's agonized moan Steve heard the sound of

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gunfire coming from the woods below. A shower of black earth sprang up and spattered around the feet of the guards. Guns fell from their hands and their arms reached into the air.

A small band of miners started out of the woods, moving slowly across the blackened earth of the hollow.

Lorny buried her face against Steve's chest. He took her in his arms and laid his cheek against her hair.

On the opposite hillside came the familiar glint of sun off the camera's lens. Charlie and Usher were there, with sound and film. Steve was sure they had got it all.

Slowly she lifted her head and he looked into her upturned face, into blue eyes blurred by tears, filled with sorrow and uncertainty.

His voice was husky in his throat when he spoke, and his eyes stung. "Your father didn't plan it this way, but he knew it could happen and he took the chance."

She nodded quickly, biting her lower lip. Then she reached for his hand and in a while they started down into the hollow together.

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a *NEW* Interpol story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Here is the third story about Interpol, and about the two investigators you've met in their previous adventures together—Sebastian Blue, formerly of Scotland Yard, and Laura Charme, formerly in the translating department of the International Criminal Police Organization. And here are some of the ingredients in this third exploit of the series: a Mythology Fair, a modern Medusa, a larger-than-life statue of King Neptune complete with trident, gold smuggling, murder, and last, but definitely not least, a baffling and ingenious locked-room mystery . . . Resist those story elements if you can! . . .

INTERPOL: The Case of the Modern Medusa

by EDWARD D. HOCH

She was too beautiful to make a convincing Medusa, even with the terrible wig and its writhing plastic serpents. Gazing at herself in the mirror, Gretchen could only wonder at the chain of events that had caused Dolliman to hire her in the first place. Then the buzzer sounded and it was time to make her entrance.

She rose through a trap door in the floor, effectively masked by a cloud of chemically produced mist. As the mist cleared enough for the audience to see her, there were the usual startled exclamations. Then Toby, playing the part of Perseus, came forward with his sword and shield to slay her. It wasn't exactly according to mythology, but it seemed to please the audience of tourists.

As Toby lifted his sword to strike, her mind was on other things. She was remembering the charter flights to the Far

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East, the parties and the fun. But most of all she was remembering the gold. It was a great deal to give up, but she'd made her decision.

Toby, following the script they'd played a hundred times before, pushed her down into the swirling mists and grabbed the dummy head of Medusa that was hidden there. The sight of the bloody head always brought a gasp from the crowd, and this day was no exception. Gretchen felt for the trap door and opened it. While the crowd applauded and Toby took his bows, she made her way down the ladder to the lower level.

That was where they found her, an hour later. She was crumpled at the foot of the ladder, her Medusa wig a few feet away. Her throat had been cut with a savage blow, as if by a sword.

The advertisement, in the Paris edition of the English-language *Herald-Tribune*, read simply: *New Medusa wanted for Mythology Fair. Apply Box X-45.*

Laura Charme read it twice and asked, "Sebastian, what's a Mythology Fair?"

Turned around in his chair, Sebastian Blue replied, "An interesting question. The Secretary-General would like an answer, too. A Swiss citizen named Otto Dolliman started it in Geneva about two years ago. On the surface it's merely a tourist attraction, but it might be a bit more underneath."

They were in Sebastian's office on the top floor of Interpol headquarters in Saint-Cloud, a suburb of Paris. It was the sort of day when the girls in the translating department ignored the calendar and wore their summer dresses one last time. Laura had started out in the translating department herself, before the Secretary-General teamed her with Sebastian, a middle-aged Englishman formerly of Scotland Yard, and set them to investigating airline crimes around the globe.

"What happened to the old Medusa?" she asked Sebastian.

"She was a West German airline stewardess named Gretchen Spengler. It seems she was murdered two weeks ago."

"Oh, great, and I'll bet I'm supposed to take her place! I've been through this sort of thing before!"

Sebastian smiled across the desk at her. "Blame the Secretary-General. It was his idea. Seems Miss Spengler was believed to be a key link in a gold-smuggling operation which in turn is part of the world-wide narcotics network."

"You'd better explain that to me," Laura said, tossing her

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long reddish-blonde hair. "Especially if I'm supposed to take her place at this Mythology Fair."

"It seems that a good deal of Mob money—skimmed off the receipts of gambling casinos—finds its way into Swiss banks. It's used to make purchases on the international gold market, and the gold in turn is smuggled from Switzerland to the Far East, where it's then used to buy morphine base and raw opium for the making of heroin. The heroin is then smuggled into the United States, completing the world-wide circle."

"And how was Gretchen Spengler smuggling the gold?"

"Interpol's suspicion is that it traveled in the large metal food containers along with the hot meals for the passengers. Such a hiding place would need the cooperation of a stewardess, of course, so the gold wouldn't be accidentally discovered. Gretchen worked at Otto Dolliman's Mythology Fair in Geneva during her spare time, between flights, and Interpol believes Dolliman or someone else connected with the Fair recruited her for the gold smuggling. Chances are she was murdered because we were getting too close to her."

Laura nodded. "I can imagine how they'll welcome me if they discover I work for Interpol. And what are you going to be doing while I'm shaking my serpents?"

"I won't be far away," Sebastian promised. "I never am, you know."

Geneva is a city of contrasts—small in size even by Swiss standards, yet still an important world crossroads and headquarters for a half-dozen specialized agencies of the United Nations, plus the International Red Cross and the World Council of Churches. The bustle at the airport reflected this cosmopolitan atmosphere, and Laura Charme was all but swallowed up in a delegation of arriving ministers.

Finally she fought her way to a taxi and gave the address of the Mythology Fair. "I take a great many tourists there," the driver informed her, speaking French. "Are you with a tour?"

"No. I'm looking for a job."

His eyes met hers in the mirror. "French?"

"French-English. Why do you ask?"

"I just wondered. The other girl was German."

"What happened to her?"

The driver shrugged. "She was killed. Such a shame—she was a lovely girl. Like you."

"Who killed her?"

"The police don't know.

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Some madman, certainly."

He was silent then, until at last he deposited her in front of a large old house overlooking Lake Geneva. Much of the front yard had been paved over and marked off for parking, and a big green tour bus sat empty near the entrance. Laura paid the driver and went up the steps to the open door.

The first person she saw was a gray-haired woman of slender build who seemed to be selling tickets. "Four francs, please," she said in French.

"I answered the advertisement for a new Medusa. I was told to come here for an interview."

"Oh, you must be Laura Charme. Very well, come this way." The woman led her past the ticket table and down a long corridor past framed portraits of various mythic heroes. She recognized Zeus and Jason and even the winged horse, Pegasus, but was stumped when it came to the women.

The gray-haired woman turned to her and said, in belated introduction, "I'm Helen Dolliman. My husband owns this." She gestured with her hand to include, apparently, the house and entire countryside.

"It's a beautiful place," Laura said. "I do hope I'll be able to work here."

The woman smiled slightly. "Otto liked the picture you sent. And it's difficult to get just the girl we want. I think you'll get the job." She paused before a closed door of heavy oak. "This is his office."

She knocked once and opened the door. The room itself was quite small, with only a single window covered by heavy wire mesh. The furnishings, too, were small and ordinary. But what set the room apart at once was the eight-foot-tall statue of King Neptune that completely dominated the far wall, crowding even the desk behind which a thin-haired middle-aged man was working.

"Otto," his wife announced, "this is Miss Charme, from Paris."

The man put down his pen and looked up, smiling. His face was drawn and his skin chalky-white, but the smile helped. "Ah, so good of you to come all this distance, Miss Charme! I do think you'll make a perfect Medusa."

"Thank you, I guess." Her eyes left his face and returned to the statue.

"You're admiring my Neptune."

"It's certainly . . . large."

He got up and stood beside it. "This is one of a series of the Roman gods, sculptured in the style of Michelangelo's Moses

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by the Italian Compoli in the last century. The trident that Neptune holds is very real, and quite sharp."

He lifted it from the statue's grasp and held it out to Laura. She saw the three spear-points aimed at her stomach and shuddered inwardly. "Very nice," she managed as he returned the weapon to its resting place with Neptune. "But tell me, just what is the Mythology Fair?"

"It is an exhibit, my dear girl—a live-action exhibit, if you will. All the gods and heroes and demons of myth are represented here—Greek, Roman, even Norse and Oriental. Our workrooms and dressing rooms are on the lower level. This level and the one above are open to the public for a small admission charge. They view paintings and statues representing the figures of myth—but more than that, they are entertained by live-action tableaux of famous scenes from mythology. Thus we have Ulysses returning to slay the suitors, the wooden horse at the walls of Troy, Perseus slaying Medusa, Cupid and Psyche, King Midas, Venus and Adonis, the labors of Hercules, and many others."

"Quite a bit of violence in some of those."

Otto Dolliman shrugged. "The public buys violence. And if some of our goddesses show a bit of bosom, the public buys that, too."

"I was wondering how someone like me could land the job of Medusa. I always thought she was quite ugly."

"It was the snakes in her hair that turned men to stone, my dear girl. And we will furnish those." He reached into the bottom drawer of his desk and produced a dark wig with a dozen plastic serpents hanging from it. As he held it out to Laura, the snakes began to move, seeming to take on a life of their own. Laura gasped and jumped back.

"They're alive!" she screeched.

"Not really," Mrs. Dolliman said, stepping forward to take the wig from her husband's hand. "We have little magnets in the snakes' heads, positioned so that the heads repel one another. They produce some quite realistic effects at times. See?"

Laura took a deep breath and accepted the wig. It seemed to fit her head well, though the weight of the magnetized serpents was uncomfortably heavy. "How long do I have to wear this thing?" she asked.

"Not more than a few minutes at a time," Dolliman assured her. "You come up

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through a trap door, hidden by some chemical mist, and Toby kills you with his sword. You fall back into the mist clouds, Toby reaches down, and holds a fake papier-mâché head aloft for the spectators to gasp at. I know it isn't exactly according to the myth—Medusa was asleep at the time of her death, for one thing—but the public enjoys it this way."

"Who's Toby?"

"What?"

"Who's Toby?" Laura repeated. "This fellow with the sword."

"Toby Marchant," Dolliman explained. "He's English, a nice fellow, really. He plays Perseus, and quite well, too. Come on, you might as well meet him."

Laura followed Otto and his wife out of the office and down the corridor to a wing of the great house. They passed a group of tourists, probably from the green bus out front, being guided through the place by a handsome young man, dressed in a black blazer, who bowed slightly as they passed.

"That's Frederick, one of our guides," Helen Dolliman explained. "With the guides and the actors, and a few workmen, we employ a staff of thirty-four people here. Of course many of the actors in the tableaux work only part time, between other jobs."

They paused before one stage, standing behind a dozen or so customers before a curtained stage. As the curtains parted Laura saw a bare-chested man who seemed to have the legs and body of a horse. She could tell it was a fake, but a clever one. "The centaur," Dolliman said. "Very popular with the tours. Ah, here is Toby."

A muscular young man about Laura's age, with shaggy black hair and a beard, came through a service door in the wall. He smiled at Laura, looking her up and down. "Would this be my new Medusa?"

"We have just hired her," Dolliman confirmed. "Laura Charme, meet Toby Marchant."

"A pleasure," she replied, accepting his hand. "But tell me, what have you been doing for a Medusa all these weeks?"

Toby Marchant shook his head sadly. "Venus has been filling in, but it's not the same. She has to run back and forth between the two stages. But she was doing it while Gretchen was flying, so she was the logical one to fill in." He glanced at Dolliman and brought his hand out from behind his back, revealing a paper bag. "Speaking of Gretchen—"

"Yes?" Dolliman asked.

Toby opened the bag re-

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luctantly and brought out the head of a young girl, covered with blood. Laura took one look and screamed.

Helen Dolliman motioned her to silence, glancing around to see who had heard the outburst. "It's only the papier-mâché head we told you about," she explained quickly. "You'll have to learn to control yourself better!"

"What is this place—a chamber of horrors?" Laura asked.

"No, no," Toby said, embarrassed and trying to calm her. "I shouldn't have pulled it out like that. It's just that the head was made to look like Gretchen and now she's dead. We can't use Venus' head. We'll need a new one made for Laura here, or the illusion will be ruined."

"I'll take care of it," Dolliman assured him. "Give me the bag."

Laura took a deep breath. "The taxi driver told me Gretchen was murdered. Did the police find her killer?"

"Not yet," Toby admitted. "But it must have been some sex fiend with one of the tours. Apparently he slipped downstairs and was waiting when she came through the trap door. I was right above her, but I never heard a thing."

"Toby was busy taking bows," Helen Dolliman snorted. "He wouldn't have heard a thing."

They went downstairs, showing Laura the dressing room that would be hers, the ladder leading to the trap door, the stage where she'd be beheaded five or six times daily, depending on the crowds. "Think you can do it?" Toby asked at the conclusion of a quick run-through.

"Sure," Laura said bravely. "Why not?"

A tall redhead wearing too much makeup came by, glancing up at the stage. "Better close that. Another bus just pulled up."

"This is our Venus and part-time Medusa," Toby said, making introductions. "Hilda Aarons."

Hilda grunted something meant to be a greeting and sauntered off. Laura was rapidly deciding that the Mythology Fair wasn't the friendliest place to work.

Sebastian Blue arrived two days after Laura started her chores as Medusa. He came with a group of touring Italians, but managed to separate himself from them, wandering off by himself down one of the side corridors.

"Can I help you?" a pleasant young man in a black blazer asked.

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"Just looking around," Sebastian told him.

"I'm Frederick Braun, one of the tour guides. If you've become separated from your group I'd be glad to show you around."

Sebastian thought his blond good looks were strongly Germanic. He was a Hitler Youth, born thirty years too late. "I was looking for the director. I believe his name is Dolliman."

"Certainly. Right this way."

Otto Dolliman greeted Sebastian with a limp handshake and said, "No complaints, I hope."

"Not exactly. I represent the International Criminal Police Organization in Paris."

If possible, Dolliman's face grew even whiter. "Interpol? Is it about that girl's murder?"

"Yes, it is," Sebastian admitted. "We'd had her under limited surveillance in connection with some gold-smuggling activities."

"Gretchen a gold smuggler? I can't believe that!"

"Nevertheless it seems to have been true. Didn't it ever strike you as strange that she continued working as an airline stewardess even after you hired her for your Mythology Fair?"

"Not at all, Mr. Blue. Both positions were essentially part-time. She worked charter flights and nonscheduled trips to the Far East mainly. And of course the bulk of her work here was during the vacation season and on weekends."

"Have you replaced her in the Fair?"

Dolliman nodded. "I hired a French girl just the other day. It's almost time for the next performance. Would you like to see it?"

"Very much."

Sebastian followed him down a hallway to the exhibit proper, where a string of little stages featured recreations of the more spectacular events of mythology. After watching a bearded Zeus hurl a cardboard thunderbolt, they moved on to the Medusa exhibit.

"That's Toby Marchant. He plays Perseus," Dolliman explained. The young man in a brief toga carried a sword and shield in proper Medusa-slaying tradition. He moved carefully through the artificial mist that rose from unseen pipes and acted out his search for the serpent-headed monster. Presently she appeared through the mist, up from the trap door. Sebastian thought Laura looked especially lovely in her brief costume. The snakes in her hair writhed with some realism, but otherwise she was hardly a convincing monster.

Toby Marchant, holding the

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shield protectively in front of him, swung out wildly with his sword. It was obvious he came nowhere near her, but Laura fell back into the mist with a convincing gasp. Toby reached down and lifted a bloody head for the spectators to gasp at.

"It was after this that Gretchen was killed," Dolliman explained in a whisper. "She slipped down through the trap door, and somebody was waiting at the foot of the ladder. Hilda found her about an hour later."

"Is it possible that Toby might have actually killed her in full view of the spectators?"

Dolliman shook his head. "The police have been all through this. The throat wound would have killed her almost instantly. She could never have gone through that trap door and down the ladder. Besides, the people would have seen it. There'd have been blood on the stage. She bled a great deal. Besides, his sword is a fake."

"That mist could have washed the blood away."

"No. Whoever killed her, it wasn't Toby. It was someone waiting for her below."

"The police report says the weapon was probably a sword."

"Unfortunately there are nearly fifty swords of various shapes and sizes on the premises. Some are fakes, like Toby's, but some are the real thing."

"I'd like to speak to your new Medusa if I could," Sebastian said.

"Certainly. I'll call her."

After a few moments Laura appeared, devoid of snakes and wearing a robe over her Medusa costume. Sebastian motioned her down the corridor, where they could talk in privacy. "How's it going?"

"Terrible," she confessed. "I've had to do that silly stunt five times a day. Yesterday when I came through the trap door that guide, Frederick, was waiting down below to grab my leg. I thought for a minute I was going to be the next victim."

"Oh?"

"He seems fairly harmless, though. I chased him away and he went. How much longer do I have to be here?"

"Till we find out something. Has anyone approached you about smuggling gold?"

She shook her head. "And I even mentioned over breakfast yesterday that I'd once been an airline stewardess. I think the gold smugglers have switched to a different gimmick, but I don't know what it is."

They'd almost reached Otto Dolliman's office, and suddenly Toby Marchant hurried out. "Have you seen Otto?" he

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asked Laura. "He's not in his office and I can't find him anywhere."

"We left him not five minutes ago, down by the tableaux."

"Thanks," Toby said, and hurried off in that direction.

"He seemed quite excited," Sebastian remarked.

"He usually is," Laura said. "But he's a good sort."

They paused by the open door of Dolliman's office, and he asked. "Do you think Dolliman is the gold smuggler? Is there any way all this could be going on without his knowledge?"

"It seems unlikely," she admitted. "But if he's behind it, would he kill Gretchen right on the premises and risk all the bad publicity?"

"These days bad publicity can be good publicity. I'll wager the crowds have picked up since the killing."

At that moment Otto Dolliman himself came into view, hurrying along the corridor. "Excuse me," he said. "I have to place an important call."

Toby came along behind him and seemed about to follow him into the office, but Dolliman slammed the big oak door. Toby glanced at Sebastian and Laura, shrugged, and went on his way.

"Now what was that all about?" Laura wondered aloud.

"It's your job to find out, my dear," Sebastian reminded her.

They were just moving away from the closed office door when they heard a sound from inside. It was like a gasp, followed by the beginning of a scream.

"What's that?" Laura asked.

"Come on, something's happening in there!" Sebastian reached the office door and opened it.

Otto Dolliman was sprawled in the center of the little office, his eyes open and staring at the ceiling. The trident from King Neptune's statue had been driven into his stomach. There was little doubt that he was dead.

"My God, Sebastian!" Laura gasped.

He'd drawn the gun from his belt holster. "Stay here in the doorway," he cautioned. "Whoever killed him must be still in the room."

His eyes went from the partly open window with its wire-mesh grille to the cluttered desk and the statue of Neptune beside it. Then he stepped carefully back and peered behind the door, but there was no one.

The room was empty except for Otto Dolliman's body . . .

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"The thing is impossible," Sebastian Blue said later, after the police had come again to the Mythology Fair with their cameras and their questions. "We were outside that door all the time and no one entered or left. The killer might have been hiding behind the desk when Dolliman entered the room, but how did he get out?"

"The window?"

He walked over to examine it again, but he knew no one could have left that way. Though the window itself had been raised a few inches, the wire-mesh grille was firmly bolted in place and intact. Sebastian could barely fit two fingers through the openings. The window faced the back lawn, with a cobblestone walk about five feet below. Obviously the grille was to keep out thieves.

"Nothing here," Sebastian decided. "It's an impossible crime—a locked room, except that the room wasn't actually locked."

"You must have had those at Scotland Yard all the time."

"Only in books, my dear." He frowned at the floor where the body had rested, then looked up at the mocking statue of Neptune.

"An arrow could pass through this grillework," Laura remarked, still studying the window. "And they use arrows in the Ulysses skit."

"But he wasn't killed with an arrow," Sebastian reminded her. "He was killed with a trident, and it was right here in the room with him." He'd examined the weapon at some length before the police took it away, and had found nothing except a slight scratch along its shaft. There were no fingerprints, which ruled out the remote possibility of suicide.

"A device of some sort," she suggested next. "An infernal machine rigged up to kill him as soon as he entered the office."

"A giant rubber band?" Sebastian said with a dry chuckle. "But he was in there for a few minutes before the murderer struck, remember? And besides, what happened to this machine of yours? There's no trace of it now."

"A secret passage? We know there are trap doors in the floors around here."

"The police went over every square inch. No, it's nothing like that."

"Then how was it done?"

Sebastian was staring up at Neptune's placid face. "Unless that statue came alive long enough to kill him, I don't see any solution." He turned and headed for the door. "But one person I intend to speak to is Toby Marchant."

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They found Toby talking with Frederick and Hilda and some of the others in a downstairs dressing room. While Laura still tried to keep up the pretense that Sebastian Blue had merely been questioning her, he turned his attention to Toby, calling him aside.

"All right, Toby, it's time to quit playing games. Two people are dead now, and with Dolliman gone chances are you'll be out of a job anyway. What do you know about this?"

"Nothing, I swear!"

"But you were looking for Dolliman just before he was killed. You told him something that sent him hurrying to his office to make a phone call."

Toby Marchant hesitated. "Yes," he said finally. "I suppose I'll have to tell you about that, Mr. Blue. You see, I came across some information regarding Gretchen's death—information I thought he should know."

"And now he's dead, so should I know it."

Another hesitation. "It's about Hilda Aarons. I caught her going through some of Gretchen's things, apparently looking for something."

Sebastian glanced past his shoulder toward the tall redhead. She was watching them intently. "And you told Otto Dolliman about this?"

Toby nodded. "He'd asked us to watch out for anything suspicious. What I told him about Hilda seemed to confirm some information he already had. He said he had to make a phone call at once."

"But not to the police, apparently. He walked right by me and went into his office."

"He may not have trusted an outsider. Sometimes he acted as if he trusted only his wife."

"Have you seen Helen Dolliman recently?" Sebastian asked. He'd had only a few words with her before the police arrived.

"She's probably up in her room. Second floor, the far wing."

Sebastian found Helen Dolliman alone in her room, busy packing a single suitcase. Her eyes were red, as if from tears. "You're leaving?"

"Do I have anything to stay here for?" she countered. "The police will shut us down now. And even if they don't, I have no intention of spending another night in the same house with a double murderer. He killed Otto and I'm probably next on his list."

"Do you have any idea why your husband was murdered?"

The little woman swept a wisp of hair from her eyes. "I suppose for the same reason the girl was."

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"Which was?"

"The gold."

"Yes, the gold. What do you know about it?"

"About a year ago Otto caught a man with some small gold bars. He fired him on the spot, but we've always suspected there were others involved."

"Gretchen Spengler?"

"Yes. Before she died she told Otto she was getting out of it."

"Toby says he caught Hilda Aarons going through Gretchen's things after she was killed. He told Otto about it."

She nodded. "My husband discussed it with me. We were going to fire Hilda."

"Might that have caused her to kill him?"

"It might have, if she's a desperate person."

"Apparently he was trying to call someone about it just before he was killed."

"Perhaps," she said with a shrug, subsiding into a sort of willing acceptance.

He could see there was no more to be learned from her. He excused himself and went back down in search of Laura.

She was talking with Frederick Braun at the foot of the stairs, but the blond tour guide excused himself as Sebastian approached. "What was all that?"

"He's still after me," she said with a shrug. "I really think he's a frustrated Pan, speaking in mythological terms."

Sebastian frowned at the young man's retreating back, watching him go out the rear door of the house. Then he said, "We're going to have to move fast. Helen Dolliman is preparing to close the place and leave. Once everybody scatters we'll never get to the bottom of this thing."

"How can we get to the bottom of it anyway, Sebastian? We've got two murders, one of them an impossibility."

"But we've got a lead, too. Gretchen was killed and the smuggling by aircraft apparently ended. Yet the murderer has stayed on here at the Mythology Fair. We know that because he killed Dolliman, too. I reject for the moment the idea of two independent killers. So what have we? The gold smugglers still at work, but not using aircraft. They have found a new route for their gold, and we must find it, too."

"Let me work on it," Laura Charme said. Staring at an approaching group of tourists, she had suddenly got an idea.

Night came early at this time of year, with the evening sun vanishing behind the distant

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Alps by a little after six. One of the tour groups was still inside the big house when Laura slipped out the rear door and moved around the cobblestone walk past the window to Dolliman's office. She came out at the far end of the paved parking area, near the single green tour bus that still waited there.

If the Mythology Fair was really closing down, she knew the smuggler would have to move fast to dispose of any remaining gold. And if she'd guessed right about these tour buses, she might see something very interesting as darkness fell.

She'd been standing in the shadows for about twenty minutes when the bus driver appeared from the corner of the building, carrying something heavy in both hands. He paused by the side of the vehicle and opened one of the luggage compartments. But he wasn't stowing luggage. Instead he seemed to be lifting up a portion of the compartment floor, shifting baggage out of the way.

Laura stepped quickly from the shadows and moved up behind him. "What do you have there?" she asked.

The man whirled at the sound of her voice. He cursed softly and grabbed an iron bar that was holding open the luggage compartment door. As the door slammed shut she saw him coming at her with the bar, raising it high overhead. She dipped, butting him in the stomach, and grabbed his wrist for a quick judo topple that sent him into the bushes by the house.

As he tried to untangle himself and catch his breath, she ripped the wrapper from the object he'd been carrying. Even in the near-darkness she could see the glint of gold.

Then she heard footsteps, and another man rounded the corner of the building. It was Toby Marchant. She rose to her feet and hurried to meet him. "Toby, that bus driver had a bar of gold. He was trying to hide it beneath the luggage compartment."

"What's this?" He hurried over to the bushes with her.

"Toby, I'll keep him here. You go find that Englishman, Sebastian Blue."

Toby turned partly away from her as the bus driver struggled to his feet. "Oh, I don't think we need Blue."

"Of course we need him! He's from Interpol, and so am I!"

"That's interesting to know," Toby said. "But I already suspected it." He turned back toward her and now she saw the gun in his

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hand. "Don't make a sound, my dear, or you'll end up the way Gretchen and Otto did."

"I—"

"Tie her up, Gunter," he told the driver. "And gag her. We'll stow her in the luggage compartment and take her along for security."

Laura felt rough hands yank her wrists behind her. Then, suddenly, the parking area was flooded with light from overhead. Toby whirled and fired a shot without aiming. There was an answering shot as the bus driver dropped her wrists and started to run. He staggered and went down hard.

"Drop the gun, Toby," Sebastian called out from beyond the spotlights. "We want you alive."

Toby Marchant hesitated, weighing his chances, and then let the gun fall from his fingers.

It was some time later before Laura could get all the facts out of Sebastian Blue. They were driving back to the airport, after Toby Marchant had been turned over to the local police and the bus driver rushed to the hospital.

"How did you manage to get there in the nick of time?" she asked him. "I didn't tell you of my suspicions about the tour buses."

"No, but you didn't have to. I had my own suspicions of Toby, and I was watching him. I saw him meet the driver and get the gold bar from its hiding place. When I saw him point the gun at you, I switched on the overhead lights and then the shooting started. Luckily for us both, Toby had no idea how many guns were against him, so he chose to surrender."

"But how did you know Toby was involved in the smuggling?"

"I didn't, but I was pretty sure he'd committed both murders, which made him the most likely candidate."

"He killed Otto Dolliman in that locked room? But how?"

"There's only one way it could have been done, ruling out secret passages and invisible men. Remember that scratch along the shaft of the trident? Toby entered the office prior to Dolliman's arrival, removed the trident from the statue of Neptune, and thrust the shaft of it through the wire grating on the window. Remember, the window itself was open a few inches. Thus, the pronged head of the trident was inside the office, but the shaft was sticking out the window.

"Toby then got Otto to enter the office on some pretext—probably telling him to phone for urgent supplies of some sort—left the house,

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walked around the cobblestone path just outside, and positioned himself at the window. Perhaps Dolliman saw the trident sticking through the grillework and walked over to investigate. Or perhaps Toby called him to the window, pretending to find it like that. In either event, as Dolliman reached the window, Toby drove the trident into his stomach, killing him. He then pushed the shaft all the way through the wire grillework, so the trident remained in Dolliman's body and made it appear that the killer must have been in the room with him."

"But why did he want to kill him in a locked room?"

"He didn't. He was just setting up an alibi for himself, since we saw him leave Dolliman alive. He couldn't foresee that we'd remain outside the door and hear Dolliman's dying gasps. You see, once I figured out the method, Toby had to be the killer. We'd seen him come out of that office ourselves. And the killer had to be in the office prior to the killing to push the trident through the screen. He couldn't have it sticking out the window for long, risking discovery, so he had to lure Dolliman back to his office.

"That was where Toby made his big mistake. When we surprised him coming out of the office, he had to act as if he was frantically seeking Dolliman to tell him something. Later, when I asked him what it was all about, he had to come up with a good lie. He said he'd told Dolliman he caught Hilda going through Gretchen's things. I suspect that was true, and that it involved your friend Frederick, the guide, *but*—Helen Dolliman later told me her husband had discussed the matter with her."

"Which meant," Laura said, "he must have told Dolliman about it much earlier."

"Exactly. Early enough for Dolliman to discuss it with his wife. And if Toby lied about the reason for luring Dolliman to his office, it figured that he also prepared the trident and killed him with it."

"What about Gretchen?"

"She wanted out of the gold smuggling, so he had to kill her—she knew too much. I suppose Dolliman was suspicious that Toby killed her, so Dolliman had to die, too. Either that, or Dolliman discovered that Toby was now using the tour buses to smuggle the gold out of Switzerland."

"But I thought we decided Toby couldn't have done it because he was still on stage when Gretchen went through the trap door to her death.

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Don't tell me we have another impossible crime!"

Sebastian shook his head. "Not really. Our mistake was in jumping to the conclusion that the killer was waiting for her. Actually, Toby went downstairs after the act was over and killed her then. I suppose he swung the sword at her in jest, just as he did on stage, only this time it was for real. She wouldn't even have screamed when she saw it coming at her."

"How awful!"

"But what about you? How did you tumble to the fact the tour buses were being used?"

Laura shrugged. "Partly intuition, I suppose. We figured the gold was still leaving the country, and not by plane. It just seemed a likely method. Tour buses cross boundary lines all the time, and they're not usually searched too carefully."

They came in sight of the airport and Sebastian said, "I imagine Paris will look good to you after this. Or did you enjoy playing Medusa?"

She grinned and held up the wig with its writhing snakes. "I brought it along as a souvenir. Just so we'll know the whole thing wasn't a myth."

"Q"

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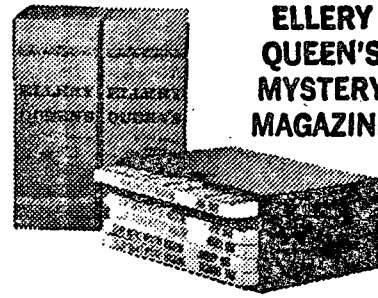

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